Sex and Politics in Three Novels by Alan Hollinghurst:

The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Folding Star*, and *The Line of Beauty

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between sex and politics in three novels by Alan Hollinghurst: *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *The Folding Star* (1994), and *The Line of Beauty* (2004). It responds to a tendency among critics and reviewers to overlook Hollinghurst's pornographic depictions of sexuality. By analyzing representations of sexuality in these novels through the lenses of history, queer theory, and psychoanalysis, the thesis investigates queer responses to the social and political conditions of Thatcherite Britain. Gay men in particular felt the impact of Thatcher's policies of deregulation and privatization, and this impact was exacerbated by the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter I examines queer history in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, specifically the arrest and prosecution of gay men in the 1940s and 1950s, and the legacy of that persecution in later decades. Chapter II focuses on *The Folding Star* and Section 28, a law drafted by Thatcher's government to limit teachers' freedom to discuss homosexuality in classrooms. Chapter III examines *The Line of Beauty*—a novel about a middle-class gay man living with an upper-class family in London headed by a MP in Thatcher's government—and discusses how Hollinghurst uses sexuality to explore the dynamics of power and privilege in Thatcherite Britain. In each of these novels, key social differences, such as race, class, and age, affect sexuality and sexual acts between individuals.

Résumé

Dans ce mémoire, l'auteur analyse les liens entre le sexe et la politique dans trois romans d'Alan Hollinghurst – *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *The Folding Star* (1994) et *The Line of Beauty* (2004) – afin de remettre en question les propos de critiques et d'auteur·rice·s de comptes rendus qui ne discuteraient pas des représentations pornographiques de la sexualité dans ces œuvres. Ainsi, l'auteur analyse ces descriptions de la sexualité selon des perspectives historique, queer et psychanalytique pour comprendre de quelle manière la littérature queer se positionne face aux conditions sociales et politiques en Grande-Bretagne thatchérienne. Les hommes gais se voient tout particulièrement affectés par les politiques de dérégulation et de privatisation sous Margaret Thatcher, ce qui fut exacerbé par l'épidémie de SIDA dans les années 1980 et 1990. Dans le chapitre I, l'auteur fait une lecture de l'histoire queer dans *The Swimming-Pool Library*, où il est question de l'arrestation et de la persécution des hommes homosexuels dans les années 1940 et 1950, et discute des retombées de cette persécution dans décennies qui suivent. Le chapitre II porte sur *The Folding Star* et sur l'article 28, une loi du gouvernement Thatcher qui visait à censurer les professeur·e·s qui voudraient discuter de l'homosexualité en salle de classe. Dans le dernier chapitre, l'auteur se sert de *The Line of Beauty* (dont le personnage principal est un homme gai de classe moyenne qui vit chez une famille bourgeoise à Londres dont le père est un élu du parti de Thatcher) pour montrer comment Hollinghurst fait usage de la sexualité pour traiter du pouvoir et du privilège en Grande-Bretagne thatchérienne. Dans tous ces romans, il est question de l'intersection des différentes catégories sociales, tels la race, la classe et l'âge, et la sexualité ainsi que les actes sexuels entre individus.

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List of Abbreviations

FS Hollinghurst, Alan. *The Folding Star*. 1994. Vintage, 1998.

"GM" Hollinghurst, Alan. "Gazing at the Moon." Review of *Seen from Behind: Perspectives on the Male Body and Renaissance Art*, by Patricia Lee Rubin. *Literary Review*, Apr. 2019, literaryreview.co.uk/gazing-at-the-moon.

LB Hollinghurst, Alan. *The Line of Beauty*. 2004. Bloomsbury, 2005.

"OW" Hollinghurst, Alan. "Alan Hollinghurst on writing The Line of Beauty." *Pan Macmillan*, 30 Apr. 2012, https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/alan-hollinghurst-on-writing-the-line-of-beauty.

SPL Hollinghurst, Alan. *The Swimming-Pool Library*. 1988. Vintage, 2006.

Introduction

British literature in the 1980s was largely concerned with Margaret Thatcher. As David Monaghan explains, "the most effective opposition to the Conservative government that ruled Britain throughout the 1980s was often to be found in the creative arts, particularly in the realm of literature" (qtd. in Horton et al. 1). Joseph Brooker affirms Monaghan's account: "if Thatcherism indeed amounted to large-scale change and social drama, then one might find writers feeding off it and channelling its energies, even as they sought to criticize many of its effects" (77). Thatcher's economic impact was neo-liberal, with deregulation, privatisation, and a belief in the market as its animating principles: "the era's flagship policies included the sale of council houses; the encouragement of a boom in property sales and of attendant refurbishment and redevelopment; and extensive cuts in tax for high earners, moving towards a less progressive scheme of taxation" (Brooker 78). The results of these economic policies were dire: "Thatcher's ideological monetarist solutions to supposedly fundamental problems divided the nation, impoverished huge swathes of working-class people, created an economic recession, led to inner-city riots in 1981 and decimated Britain's industry and massively increased unemployment" (Horton et al. 3). Marginalized peoples in Britain became even more marginalized due to Thatcher's government. Gay men in particular felt the impact of Thatcherism. Ken Plummer claims that Thatcher's right-wing government "dominated the background of the gay Movement between the years 1979 and 1997 and was marked by economic conservatism, religious moralism, and a very strong profamily agenda" (135).

The British media's treatment of the AIDS crisis—an event that devastated the gay male community—reflects the Thatcher government's profamily agenda. As Simon Watney writes, the disease was reported as a "'gay plague,' (a phrase still widely in use in the British press), as

if the syndrome were a direct function of a particular sexual act—sodomy—and, by extension, of homosexual desire in all its forms" (12). Writing in 1987, Watney places emphasis on representation as a central issue of the epidemic. AIDS "is not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation itself, a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge about the human body and its capacities for sexual pleasure" (9). He identifies the stakes of representation: "if Aids is to be a metaphor for anything, it is up to us to make sure that in time it becomes regarded as a glaring example of how the ill may be victimised far beyond their physical symptoms" (11). The people blamed for the AIDS crisis were also the most affected, and the circularity of this thinking made stigmatisation more dire. In Leo Bersani's words, "those belonging to the group hit most heavily by AIDS want nothing more intensely than to see it spread unchecked" (17). Bersani—who is being ironic—points out the logical extension of this conservative argument: "those being killed are killers" (17). This unsympathetic treatment of gay men was exacerbated by a homophobic policy enacted by Thatcher's government: the twenty-eighth clause (Section 28) of the *Local Government Act 1988*. I will discuss in Chapter II how Section 28 set limits on discourse about homosexuality, limits that exacerbate the crisis of representation.

I bring up these contexts because they inform the central concern of this thesis: Alan Hollinghurst's novels and his use of sex in relation to these wider political circumstances. If literature was indeed the most effective way to oppose the Conservative government of the 1980s and its values, it is vital to look at how this was being done, especially from the perspective of an oppressed community. Hugh Stevens argues that Hollinghurst's characters "enjoy adventurous sex lives but are in most respects conservative rather than radical; cruising and sex in these novels are forms of entertainment, pleasurable diversions rather than acts of resistance"

("Normality and Queerness in Gay Fiction" 86). Stevens may be drawing connections between Hollinghurst and earlier works in the gay literary canon, such as E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1914, published posthumously in 1971), a novel that influences much of Hollinghurst's work. Forster presents the sexual relationship between Maurice and Alec as an act of resistance. In one passage, they play cricket on the same team (a metaphor for their relationship) the day after they have sex for the first time. Maurice "felt that they were against the whole world, that […] all England were closing round the wickets. They played for the sake of each other and of their fragile relationship" (Forster 178-79). Within Forster's framework, sex is positive because it consolidates communities. It is an act of resistance against structures of oppression. It builds a deep connection between the people engaging in it. With Hollinghurst, the framework is not so clear-cut.

This is not to say that sex does not serve as an act of resistance in Hollinghurst's novels, but that the metaphor is not so direct. While sex may be primarily a source of entertainment and pleasure for his characters, it takes on a larger significance for the reader. In an interview with Hollinghurst, Giles Harvey notes that the "past is everywhere present in Hollinghurst's work. In a sense, his entire career has been an attempt to recover a lost—indeed, an actively suppressed—gay cultural heritage. Sex is a way into history for Hollinghurst precisely because it is something historians tend to neglect, and nothing is more appealing to the novelistic imagination than a blank." Although Hollinghurst's *entire* career is not about recovering a lost gay history, he does highlight the centrality of sex in his novels. Hollinghurst's preoccupation with sex is certainly obvious to the reader who comes across explicit passages such as "I saw myself pissing over him, jamming my cock down his throat, forcing my fingers up his ass" (*SPL* 191). The explicitness performs a function beyond being just pornographic, especially considering that this

passage in particular is about a white aristocratic man imagining himself dominating a younger, working-class rent boy. Harvey's observation about Hollinghurst also illuminates the importance of focusing on sex as an historically neglected aspect of gay life.

To that end, this thesis will explore the relationship between sex and politics in three of Hollinghurst's novels: *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *The Folding Star* (1994), and *The Line of Beauty* (2004). It does so by analyzing representations of sexuality in Hollinghurst's novels through the lenses of history, queer theory, and psychoanalysis to determine a queer response to the social and political conditions of Thatcherite Britain. This thesis addresses both the explicit depictions of sex and the representations of gay desire; it defines politics both as having to do with the actual politics of the time (Thatcherism, conservativism of 1980s Britain) and as the dynamics of power between individuals influenced by key social differences (race, class, and age). Mark Mathuray, in the introduction to his collection of essays *Sex and Sensibility in the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst*, argues that critics and reviewers of Hollinghurst's novels "seem to gloss over or gesture rather weakly at what must come as quite a shock for many readers, the explicit descriptions of same-sex sex in his earlier novels, his incorporation of the pornographic within the conventions of high literary fiction" (2). He notes a tendency among critics to "'sanitise' and often to 'de-gay' [Hollinghurst's] texts. When Hollinghurst won the Booker Prize [for *The Line of Beauty*], the chair of the committee, Chris Smith, felt it necessary to claim that 'the fact that it was a gay novel did not figure at all in the discussions'" (Mathuray 2). The question of Hollinghurst being a gay writer—his works being gay novels—comes up in numerous interviews.

In one interview with *The Guardian*, Hollinghurst states: "I only chafe at the 'gay writer' tag if it's thought to be what is most or only interesting about what I'm writing … the books …

are actually about all sorts of other things as well—history, class, culture … It's not just, as you would think if you read the headlines in the newspapers, about gay sex" (qtd. in Stevens "Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Fiction" 627). These limitations of being labelled a gay writer hold true only if one assumes that gay sex has absolutely nothing to do with the other things that Hollinghurst writes about: history, class, and culture. As Stevens points out, "It isn't surprising that gay and lesbian fiction has often been concerned with sexual questions, but queer novels have never been 'just' about sex and sexuality. Their representation of sexuality has been varied and complex" ("Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Fiction" 627). By focusing on gay sex, the reader does not see the broader implications of that representation of sexuality. By ignoring the gay sex, the reader may overlook aspects of Hollinghurst's work such as his social and political commentary. The tendency to overlook the explicit depictions of sex is made more difficult because these novels are unquestionably about being gay and having sex (gay sex in particular). Whereas Mathuray's collection attends to the connection between sex and aesthetics, this thesis focuses on the theoretical and political connections between sex and politics.

Chapter I focuses on *The Swimming-Pool Library*. It draws heavily from Alan Sinfield's theory that differences in power—race, class, age—are actively sexy. Furthermore, he argues that although some depictions of sex have radical potential as affronts to larger structures of oppression, most instances actually reify existing dynamics of power. This is especially true in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, which depicts Will Beckwith, a white aristocratic male, engaging in sexual relationships where he takes pleasure in dominating racialized and working-class men. The novel also engages with mid-century British history, namely the widespread arrests and prosecutions of gay men in the 1940s and 1950s. This thesis uses writings by Brian Lewis, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters to explore how Hollinghurst engages with this history. Hollinghurst ties

Will's family legacy to this history and presents a comeuppance for Will in the form of sex: his being fucked by the black chef Abdul. I focus on spatiality as a major theme in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, namely how social and political conditions affecting homosexuality determine which spaces gay desire can or cannot be acted upon. To that end, this thesis turns to the works of Aaron Betsky and John Potvin, who write about the construction of queer spaces. Lee Edelman's and David Ashford's writings on specific spaces, the men's room and the London Underground respectively, also inform Chapter I's analysis of spatiality.

Chapter II focuses on *The Folding Star*, which is about an English teacher in his thirties, Edward Manners, developing a fixation on his seventeen-year-old student Luc Altidore. *The Folding Star* responds to enactment of Section 28, which limits teachers' abilities to conduct discourses about homosexuality. Hollinghurst, perhaps uncoincidentally, writes about a teacher who seduces one of his students as an affront to Section 28 and the homophobic Thatcher government that drafted it. Chapter II engages with the writings of Sigmund Freud, Brad Epps, and Laura Mulvey to discuss fetishism and scopophilia, which express desires that are not directly avowed. Queer theoretical conceptions of childhood, namely those of Edelman, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Kathryn Bond Stockton, help frame the depiction of childhood trauma and the difficulties of growing up gay within a conservative political climate.

Chapter III focuses on *The Line of Beauty*, which is about Nick Guest, a middle-class gay man, and his sexual journey while living with the Feddens, an upper-class family, in London. The chapter focuses on Nick's relationship with the two Fedden men: Toby, Nick's friend from Oxford, and Toby's father Gerald, a conservative Member of Parliament. It similarly draws on Freud's and Epps' ideas of fetishism, along with John Berger's writings about spectatorship of the European nude painting and Sianne Ngai's essay on the affect of envy. *The Line of Beauty*

responds to the varsity novel tradition to situate the homosocial and unrequited relationship between Nick and Toby. With respect to Gerald, Chapter III focuses on the dynamics of power and analyzes the novel through Christopher Chitty's argument that queer individuals and conservative institutions are codependent. The chapter reveals how gay desire illuminates these themes of privilege, wealth, and power.

These novels respond to key historical moments during Thatcherism. *The Swimming-Pool Library* was published in 1988, the year Section 28 was enacted, but set in 1983, when the AIDS crisis, having already begun some years earlier, was becoming a full-blown outbreak ("A Timeline of HIV and AIDS"). The novel focuses on earlier prosecutions of gay men in the 1940s and 1950s while gay men were once again persecuted by society. Graphic depictions of sex in the novel radically oppose the silencing that Section 28 attempts. *The Folding Star*, which engages the proscriptions of Section 28, was published in 1994. Although the novel is set in Belgium, its setting is a parable for Britain and reflects how decades of political conservatism have rendered Britain uninhabitable for gay individuals. *The Line of Beauty*, published in 2004, returns to the 1980s, specifically years dominated by Thatcherism and the AIDS crisis. Hollinghurst describes writing *The Line of Beauty*:

> The novel opens in the late summer of 1983, just when my first book closed, and I must have felt I could at last address the upheavals, not only of Aids but of the whole of British society, that occurred over the following years. […] My whole instinct was to work by irony and to make the world of money and power that young Nick Guest is drawn to absorb him and then expel him, as if from some phoney paradise. Nick was to be an unpolitical person in an age reconfigured by a political revolution. ("OW")

In Hollinghurst's novels, gay sex is inevitably political. None of his characters can successfully avoid the political revolution happening around them. After all, the effects of Thatcherism are so widespread that novelists had no choice but to respond to its policies and changes.

Chapter I: "An Act of Will": Sex, History, and Spatiality in *The Swimming-Pool Library*

Towards the end of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, protagonist Will Beckwith refuses to let Gabriel, an Argentinian man he had picked up from a hotel bar, penetrate him with a gigantic pink dildo. Gabriel does not take kindly to Will's refusal: "'I could whip you,' he suggested, 'for what you did to my country in the war'" (*SPL* 396). He refers to the Falklands War between Argentina and the United Kingdom, which took place in 1982. His intention to whip Will, whether spoken in jest or in earnest, would be an act of retaliation for both his rejection and his being British. Will then responds in a way that reveals a central theme of the novel: "'I think that might be to take the sex and politics metaphor a bit too seriously, old chap'" (*SPL* 396). Will does not deny the connection between sex and politics, but Hollinghurst uses the phrase "'a bit too seriously'" (*SPL* 396) to underscore that the sex and politics metaphor runs throughout *The Swimming-Pool Library*. All of the sex is political; all of the politics are sexual.

The Swimming-Pool Library recounts what Will refers to as his "*belle époque*" (4), a term Hollinghurst uses archly since the novel is set in 1983 during "the last summer of its kind there was ever to be" (4) suggesting that the ongoing AIDS crisis would irrevocably alter Will's life. After graduating from Oxford, Will lives in London in a flat paid for by his grandfather and spends money from his trust fund. Will is the grandson of Viscount Beckwith and heir to the title. Without any need to work for money, he spends this summer "riding high on sex and self-esteem" (*SPL* 4). His erotic encounters are undertaken with the seriousness of a career. When Charles Nantwich, an elder gay peer who hires Will to write a biography of him, he discovers that his family legacy is rooted in the prosecution of gay men. This chapter argues that *The Swimming-Pool Library* links sex and politics through the concept of spatiality. I discuss Hollinghurst's use of architecture, interior design, and London infrastructure to explore the

spaces in which its queer characters live, cruise, or have sex. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes how Hollinghurst engages with mid-century British history and its influence on these spaces.

The novel begins with Will in the London Underground: "I came home on the last train" (1). It features several passages set in the Underground that serve a particular sexual function. According to David Ashford, the London Underground is a symbolic space "cut off from surface topography" (2). It is represented in literature in two ways: "firstly, the *infernal*, in which the subterranean railway was perceived as a form of hell, abyss or underworld into which London and its inhabitants were being drawn, and, secondly, the *utopian*, in which the underground helps to integrate the modern metropolis by offering new freedoms" (Ashford 2-3). The Underground traverses the city but it is separated from the urban landscape, at least the parts that actually are hidden below street level. Ashford likens it to "spaces such as the motorway, supermarket and airport lounge that are compelled to interpret their relation to the invisible landscapes they traverse through the media of signs, maps and verbal messages" (2). The Underground is an especially relational space; passengers must ascertain where they are in London through signs and symbols, maps and intercom announcements. Since its environment encourages the reading of signs and symbols, the Underground becomes a place of media consumption, as Ashford argues about the historical network of trains:

> the user is caught in an industrial process that mimics an environment for social interaction: and without the panoramic vision offered by the mainline railways, there is no obvious excuse to avoid the eyes of the passenger seated opposite. Instead, early passengers were forced to escape into those virtual spaces provided by advertising and the literature on sale at the station stalls. (2)

Although the inside of an Underground train is organized to encourage eye contact or

socialization with other travellers, the environment discourages this type of interaction with strangers. Alternatively, looking at advertisements or reading print materials sold at the stations occupies the traveller's time and energy.

In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Will consistently eschews this norm of not gazing at other passengers. In the opening passage of the novel, he stares at passengers sitting opposite from him: "maintenance men, one small, fifty, decrepit, the other a severely handsome black of about thirty-five. Heavy canvas bags were tilted against their boots, their overalls open above their vests in the stale heat of the Underground" (*SPL* 1). Will then reveals his fascination with the working class and a significant aspect of the Underground with his next observation: "They were about to start work! I looked at them with a kind of swimming, drunken wonder, amazed at the thought of their inverted lives, of how their occupation depended on our travel, but could only be pursued, I saw it now, when we were not travelling" (*SPL* 1). The proximity of travellers in the Underground allows Will take a fetishistic interest in the lives of those less privileged. Those who use it come from a variety of race and class backgrounds. The structure of the Underground does not privilege one group over another; they are all passengers on the same train. Will observes the black worker in particular: "he was very aloof, composed, with an air of massive, scarcely conscious competence—I felt more than respect, a kind of tenderness for him" (*SPL* 1).

The Underground becomes a cruising space for Will. He finds riding the trains, "sexy and strange, like a gigantic game of chance, in which one got jammed up against many queer kinds of person" (*SPL* 66). Will describes a man being interested in him: "one of the strap-hangers, a man whom I spotted eyeing the erection which even the shortest journey on tube or bus always gives me, inclined to swing or jolt towards me as the train lost or gained speed, and the pressure

of his knee on mine, and of his eyes in my lap" (*SPL* 132). Will, however, is interested in someone else, a man from the Corry who got on the train earlier at Tottenham Court Road: "He was even more deeply tanned than before, and there was something unsettling about this, as there was about his big, protuberant cock, very emphatic in his light cotton trousers, and the contrast of its fatness within his thin, taut body" (*SPL* 131). Against the social norms of the Underground, Will watches this man. The man then returns Will's attention: "He stood opposite me in the doorway, and we held each other's gaze for a long moment before each modestly looked away, though with the evident intention of looking back again after a few seconds. And so the sudden precipitation of sex had begun" (*SPL* 131). Cruising often relies on discretion and silence, or sparse verbal and symbolic communications that signify interest. Speed and mobility in the Underground puts a temporal limit to cruising. Will has a limited amount of time to pick up this this man between Tottenham Court Road and whatever his destination is. In general, Will treats streets, trains, bars, and men's rooms as sites for sex; the whole world is his stage—or his fornicatorium. Yet these public spaces also reveal a problem: desire is mobile. Will cannot control the objects of his desire; literally, and maybe metaphorically, they can get off at any station. The novel explores how Will attempts to compensate for this problem and exert control and dominance over the men he pursues.

Sex and Power

Will attributes his approach to sexual exploits with a "certainty that made each seduction, as James drily remarked, 'an act of Will'" (*SPL* 151). Hollinghurst's tongue-in-cheek decision to name his protagonist Will reflects the power that he holds and enforces over his sexual partners. James's journal provides further insight into Will's sex life: "'I thought of W. doubtless already

back with his boy & made myself madly rational about it all, how it wdn't last, how it was just sex, how yet again he had picked on someone vastly poorer & dimmer than himself—younger, too" (*SPL* 312). Will's two significant sexual partners in the novel are Arthur and Phil. Arthur is a black man and Phil working-class; both are younger than Will. Oxford-educated and upper class, Will prefers to dominate men. As James puts it, Will "picked on" (*SPL* 312) these men as a consolidation of his own will and status.

Will's economic and social privileges give him significant sexual privileges among men. The novel explores a pre-existing sexual hierarchy among gay men, which Leo Bersani reveals when describing a quintessential experience of being in a bathhouse:

> Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable. Your looks, muscles, size of cock, and shape of ass determined how happy you were going to be during those few hours, and rejection, generally accompanied by two or three words at most, could be swift and brutal, with none of the civilizing hypocrisies with which we get rid of undesirables in the outside world. (12)

The hierarchized nature of the bathhouse is a microcosm of how many gay men interact with each other. Will admits that he belongs to the privileged: "I was so lucky in general, so blessed, that my pick-ups were virtually instantaneous: the man I fancied took in my body, my cock, my blue eyes at a glance. Misunderstandings were almost unknown. Any uncertainty in a boy I wanted was usually overcome by the simple insistence of my look" (*SPL* 143). Will's whiteness permeates his treatment of sexual partners, who are often racialized men: "I spotted a lone Arab boy wandering along, hands in the pockets of his anorak, fairly unremarkable, yet with something about him which made me feel I must have him" (*SPL* 8). The "something about him"

of this boy could be exactly what Will notes initially: he is "lone," "Arab," and a "boy" (*SPL* 8). Although Will is also alone, the boy's aloneness takes on a different dimension due to his racialization—vulnerability. Will's calling him a "boy" also puts him in another category of vulnerability based on age. Will sees an opportunity to pick up this boy who is less privileged than he is on multiple axes. "I must have him" (*SPL* 8), he thinks, with the implication that Will wants this boy for ownership or utility. In either case, Will treats the lone Arab boy as less than human. Will's subjugation of the racialized man reflects the sexual politics pertinent to *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

Alan Sinfield, writing extensively about the relationship between sex and power, argues that "our desires are not ours alone; they are embedded in the power structures that organize our social being" (2). Desire does not exist in a vacuum; it can be influenced by power. Sinfield argues that "fantasies of dominance and subjection should be regarded as unsurprising transmutations of prevailing social relations of domination and subordination. Hierarchy is neither an aberration nor a misfortune in desire, but integral with it. Indeed, it may well be that power difference is the ground of the erotic; that it is sexy" (58). With regards to a relationship between a white person and a racialized person, "it seems appropriate for a white male to take a 'female' role in a mixed-race liaison, because this may compensate for the historical dominance of white men" (Sinfield 160). This is a potentially corrective relationship that reverses the dynamics of power in a relationship influenced by historical privilege and oppression. Besides the passage towards the end of *The Swimming-Pool Library* that depicts Will being fucked by Abdul, Hollinghurst's narratives do not operate this way. They instead exemplify what Kadji Amin refers to as deidealization, which "means learning to live with rather than redeem or critique the imperfect and messy relations […] between queer eros and the political" (79). To

that end, Ward Houser argues that racialized men, "being more comfortable in the submissive role, generalize from their experience of whites as holding the major power positions of American society to perceive white males as particularly sexually powerful, and so are attracted to them" (qtd. in Sinfield 160). Conversely, "some whites may 'feel more comfortable dominating' […] black gays" (Sinfield 160). Hollinghurst does not employ the perspective of the racialized individual taking on the submissive role. His protagonists are the white men who feel more comfortable dominating others, especially men who, in some way, are less privileged than they are. Sinfield adds an addendum to Houser's comment: "We might hesitate there at the expression 'feel more comfortable.' A good deal of the published evidence suggests that such preferences may be passionately driven" (Sinfield 160-61). In this hypothetical scenario, the white man finds pleasure in taking on this dominant role in the interracial relationship. In the case of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Will is especially keen and driven towards taking the dominant role in fucking the lone Arab boy.

Will adds another level to this hypothetical interaction by noting how his black boyfriend Arthur is waiting at home. In effect, he triangulates his desire: "I felt a delicious surplus of lust and satisfaction at the idea of fucking him while another boy waited for me at home" (*SPL* 8). He does not explain what in particular would add more lust or satisfaction to the situation. It could be that he is aroused by the idea of taking ownership or using as many men as possible. Or it could be that it in a way cheapens Arthur if he is not the only person receiving Will's cock. Or it could be that he is aroused by the idea of having sex with other men without Arthur's knowing. Will's relationship with Arthur is built on their racial difference: "I was eight years older than Arthur, and our affair had started as a crazy fling with all the beauty for me of his youngness and blackness" (*SPL* 45). The age difference between Will and Arthur is significant. Sinfield points

out, not unreasonably, that "older people control far more wealth and institutional power than younger people" (115). Arthur's youth—or more exactly the quality of "youngness" as a reification of his erotic attractiveness for Will—therefore provides an opportunity for Will to assume ownership of Arthur through the wealth and institutional power he holds over him.

This ownership is exacerbated when Arthur, after killing his brother's friend, hides from his brother at Will's flat. Will notes how the tense situation causes a shift in their relationship: "it became a murky business, a coupling in which we both exploited each other, my role as protector mined by the morbid emotion of my protectiveness. I saw him becoming more and more my slave and my toy, in a barely conscious abasement which excited me even as it pulled me down" (*SPL* 45). Although Arthur depends on Will for protection, Will's treatment of Arthur as his slave or toy is only an exaggeration of the relationship dynamic that they had exhibited before. Will is excited by this dynamic. When he imagines having sex with Arthur after they have broken up, he uses the language of helplessness to convey his dominance: "I thought about Arthur, and how minutely brief our affair had been, and difficult to understand. I saw him again licking my balls; or swallowing as he slowly sat down on my cock; or helpless beneath me, locking his dry heels behind my neck" (*SPL* 385). Will typically imagines sex not in terms of pleasing Arthur but how Arthur can please him. Arthur is the subservient racialized man who Will dominates.

Will's conflation of sex and power extends to his competitive nature with other gay men. At one point in the novel, Will takes an interest in Phil, another regular at the Corinthian Club, where Will is a member. Bill, another gay man who frequents the Corinthian, expresses his interest in Phil. Will later sees Phil in the locker room:

I watched him in profile: a strong pleasant face which might barely change between

> leaving school and middle age, an incurious, dependable look. But he was coming on well. His tits now bulged out impressively; and as he raised his hands to his temples and pushed back his wet hair, his biceps doubled smoothly, sleek as coupling animals. (*SPL* 34)

Phil's physical attraction could be the result of his updated physique, but there is another explanation for Will's sudden interest: "As often happens when I know someone else fancies a person I might otherwise have ignored, I realized that Bill's taste for him had made me want the boy too, and I looked at him lustfully and competitively" (*SPL* 34). Since Will places value on his sexual prowess in comparison with other gay men, Will's interest in Phil is piqued when it becomes an opportunity to display his sexual competitiveness and superiority over Bill. Furthermore, the openness of the locker room facilitates this sexual competition. The locker room is a space that allows both Will and Bill to ogle Phil's body, which is displayed openly for their gazes.

Queer Space

Spatiality is pertinent to discussions of sex and politics since the spaces in which sexuality can occur are determined by social, political, and legal factors. Aaron Betsky refers to spaces where subjects can express their queerness as combinatory; they bring together "utopian and corporeal escape, a movement inward with a movement outward" (11). Queer space being a space of escape is a tradition in the queer literary canon, such as Monroe's disappearance at the end of Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* or Maurice and Alec's escape into the green world to pursue their relationship together at the end of E.M. Forster's *Maurice*. Maurice and Alec's escape turns out to be impractical as "two world wars demanded and bequeathed new

forms of state regimentation, which the public services adopted and extended, resulting in a patrolled and built over island in which there was no place to escape" (Waters 151). The extended involvement of the state in the lives of its subjects renders escape impossible. The green world being unviable or unavailable, Betsky and John Potvin argue that queer subjects retreat into domestic space to express their queerness. Betsky discusses the home as a "collection of artifacts that defined the individual by serving as an objective map of his passions, by evoking other worlds than the one in which he was imprisoned, and mirroring him in objects became a queer version of the self-enclosed world of the family" (11). Potvin similarly claims that "aesthetic bachelor homes became in large part safe spaces of concealment, seemingly removed from the ever-expanding police surveillance and public scrutiny and yet fertile ground for a creative community to flourish openly" (30). For Potvin, the queer bachelor's domestic space is curated as a result of sociopolitical factors limiting the spaces in which homosexuality can be expressed. Will's flat in Holland Park embodies Potvin's and Betsky's ideas while posing contradictions, such as the flat being purchased by his grandfather and the novel representing Will's sexual partners, Arthur and Phil, as objects that Will collects.

Will's flat operates as a nexus of his sexuality and socioeconomic privilege. Understandably, it is where he has sex most often: "I felt the demands of an ever-intensifying privacy. Very few people came to the flat; I had whittled my social life down almost to nothing" (*SPL* 138). This characterization of the flat as a retreat, a space for privacy, is consistent with Potvin's analysis of bachelor's homes. Potvin defines the bachelor as a figure who is "preoccupied with the chief occupations of 'freedom, luxury, and self-indulgence', and hence lacked a true and honourable vocation in a world in which market capitalism, bourgeois morality and the Protestant work ethic saw this idle lifestyle as anti-masculine and anti-national" (2). The

unemployed bachelor—certainly an apt characterization of Will—contributes nothing to society and therefore poses a challenge to conventional masculinity. Additionally, Betsky argues that spaces are heavily gendered: "men in the Western world have created architecture, and women have been forced to live in its often confining structures. In return, women have used their interiors to create often beautiful, sensual, comfortable, and practical environments" (6). Betsky's view, of course, presumes traditional heteronormativity, in which a married couple heads the family home. The bachelor poses an intervention into this gendered distribution of roles, as the bachelor must also curate the interior environment and decor. The domestic space becomes "the landscape in which the battles over masculine identity and male sexuality were waged" (Potvin 4). The flat imposes normativity, yet bachelors "embodied a precarious refutation of family life as well as the ideals of generational attachments to hearth and home, inheritance and property" (Potvin 21). In this regard, the flat becomes a retreat from the structures of heterosexuality.

Collecting becomes a significant aspect of the queer bachelor's domestic space. Potvin writes that the "practices of space and interior design are the resulting matrix of aesthetic, cultural, social, psychological and memorializing registers in the life of queer men, for not only do they initiate and inform gender performances and sexual codes, but so too do they mark the domestic as a site for the enactment of a difference" (43). The domestic becomes an expression of queerness, an expression of difference from the norm despite domesticity being associated with heteronormativity. Queer bachelors therefore find identity through the collecting of objects: "a collector acquires and projects his dreams, aspirations, desires, self-worth, pleasures and sentiments on to his prized objects. These, in turn, are said to reveal a so-called mage, or identity, one in constant formation through acquisition—or consumption" (Potvin 48). Betsky likewise

sees the home as "a collection of artifacts that defined the individual by serving as an objective map of his passions, by evoking other worlds than the one in which he was imprisoned, and mirroring him in objects became a queer version of the self-enclosed world of the family" (11). Will is a collector. With a certain relish, he describes dining with James while Arthur is at his flat: "I took a slightly creepy pleasure in imagining Arthur in the flat alone, absorbing its alien richness, looking at the pictures, concentrating of course on Whitehaven's photograph of me in my little swimming-trunks, the shadow across my eyes … I doubted if the valuable discs (the Rattle *Tristan* among them) would be to Arthur's taste" (*SPL* 3). Will is a collector of pictures, many of them likely erotic, including a photograph of himself. He also collects records; classical music signifies his posh upper-class status as well as his queerness. The flat reflects Will's interest in art and music.

Will's objectification of Arthur extends to seeing Arthur as a part of his collection. At first, Will romanticizes the experience of having Arthur in his flat. His positionality changes when Arthur's stay becomes a necessity after he kills brother's friend: "sex came to justify his presence there, to confirm we were not just two strangers trapped together by fateful mistake" (*SPL* 41). His treatment of Arthur as an object becomes apparent in one passage where they have sex. Will describes a moment in which he claims not to have been in control of himself:

> I hurled the stack of newspapers I was collecting across the floor and went for him—pulled the trousers down over his narrow hips without undoing them, somehow tackled him onto the carpet, and after a few seconds' brutal fumbling fucked him cruelly. He let out little compacted shouts of pain, but I snarled at him to shut up and with fine submission he bit them back." (*SPL* 44)

Arthur is in a compromised position not only racially and sexually, but also legally. He could

face legal or mortal repercussions if he leaves Will's flat. When Arthur tries to express the pain he feels, Will denies his subjectivity and exaggerates his dependency.

After Arthur disappears, Will collects another man—Phil. At first, they have sex in an attic room of the hotel where Phil works, a space in which neither of them can claim ownership. This choice of setting reflects Will's fetish for the working class. Will's impression of Phil changes when he finds out, from Bill, that Phil works at a hotel: "'How extraordinary,' I said, my image of Phil as a military figure distorted by this notion, but settling into a new image of him, still in uniform however, marching along an upstairs corridor with a tray of coffee and sandwiches held at shoulder height" (*SPL* 95-96). By fucking Phil in the attic rooms, Will asserts his dominance over Phil's working-class life. Anxious that Phil might take his distance, Will reasserts his ownership by fucking him a second time: "It would soon be time for him to go to work, and I felt him already preparing to abstract himself. Tonight this distancing gave me a little qualm, and as he sat up to get dressed I pushed him back roughly and fucked him hard and fast, his asshole still tacky with spunk and grease from our slower, longer lovemaking just before" (*SPL* 185). This does not have the intended effect, as Phil afterwards dresses up nd shows reserve that causes Will to notice in him "an independence which it was only dignified that I should allow" (*SPL* 185). Will exercises another fantasy of control by recasting Phil in his own fantasy of service. Phil is not asserting himself, but rather Will is allowing Phil to take on his identity as a servant.

Another way in which Will exercises control over Phil is through clothing. Will dresses Phil when they visit the photographer Ronald Staines' home:

> since we were at my flat I dressed him myself. I forbade him underwear, and forced him into an old pair of fawn cotton trousers which, tight on me, were anatomically revealing

> on him. The central seam cut up deeply between his balls, and his little cock was espaliered across the top of his left thigh. A loose, boyish, blue Aertex shirt set this off beautifully, and as I followed him downstairs I was thrilled at my affront to his shyness, and could hardly wait for the strapping I would give him when we got back. (*SPL* 221)

There are several levels of ownership at work in this passage. By dressing Phil, Will infantilizes him. This is reinforced by the language Will uses: his description of Phil's "little cock" and the "boyish" shirt he dresses him in. Additionally, by putting Phil in his own clothes, Will makes Phil subservient to him; he is an extension of Will's fantasies. Finally, Will asserts his sexual dominance over Phil. He dresses Phil in a way that reveals and sexualizes him the most with no regard for Phil's comfort, which pleases Will. He then takes Phil to Staines's house, a move that threatens his ownership of Phil. While looking at photographs, Will discovers that Staines had taken Phil to his studio and started photographing him:

> Staines, stooping over the tripod, his right eye jammed into the viewfinder, was aware of us, and flapped his left arm behind him to keep us back and have us observe professional etiquette while he was concentrating. 'Try not to smile,' he said. Leaning against a tall white plinth, shirtless, his skin lubricated, almost glittering in studio lights, the top button of my trousers undone, Phil grew suddenly guilty and selfconscious. (*SPL* 233)

Staines, like Will, is also a collector of men. They differ in that Will treats men like objects whereas Staines photographs men and turns them into art. The ownership of Phil seems to be passed along. Will dresses him, but Staines styles him for the photoshoot: he removes Phil's shirt, oils his chest, and undoes the top button of his trousers. While they were both walking back to his flat, Will describes how he feels: "shocked to find out how easily he [Phil] could be manipulated, slightly sick with a feeling that perhaps I won't be able to keep him. That afternoon

I had turned him into pornography, and I was shaken to find Staines following my instinct so literally, so instantaneously" (*SPL* 233). Will does not see his dressing up of Phil as pornographic until Staines shows him the conceptual limits of his actions. If Will treats Phil as a collectible piece of art, there is a danger in other men wanting to collect him for themselves. Phil can offer pleasure for men other than Will.

Staines is not the only victor in this passage. Will notes how Phil has "an air of compromised but defiant success about him" (*SPL* 233). Phil once again succeeds in abstracting himself from Will. Will responds by claiming ownership of Phil by other means: "As we turned into my road he was hobbling and said, 'Will, I'm bursting for a piss.' The tight waistband of my trousers squeezed cruelly on his bladder" (*SPL* 233). Will takes advantage of Phil's predicament: "I unlocked the door and as he slipped in caught him by the arm and made him stand where he was. Then I knelt down and undid his shoes and pulled his socks off: he was jiggling on the spot, gasping 'Man, hurry *up*!' But instead of letting him go I led him on to the lino of the kitchen, and he stood there, obedient and desperate" (*SPL* 234). Back in his flat, Will reclaims ownership of Phil by taking control of his body:

> I took off his shirt, and undid the top button of his trousers, restoring his porno image—some tough, cocky, bemused little tart. His dick was already half-hard from the desire to piss, and as I kissed him, and bit him, and licked his tits, I whispered to him to let it go. I slipped my hands between his legs and squeezed his balls, and watched his eyes widen as he overcame his inhibition. He looked grateful, almost ecstatic, as the first shy stain blossomed in his lap, his cock jacked up under the thin skin-tight cotton, and then it was all happening, it pumped out, on and on, his left leg darkening and glistening as it drenched down. (*SPL* 234)

Will concedes the trousers to Phil—they go from being "my [Will's] trousers" (*SPL* 233) to "his trousers" (*SPL* 234)—and moves on to another method of ownership. His competitive nature emerges as he restores the image of Staines' version of Phil. He then pushes further by exerting a deeper form of control than Staines taking photographs of Phil: taking control of Phil's bodily functions. He orders Phil to pee in his pants despite his natural inhibition not to. Will, however, is not done: "when he had finished I went behind him, pulled down his trousers, pushed him to the floor and fucked him in it like a madman" (*SPL* 234). This act reaffirms Phil's social position as subservient to that of Will. Younger and working-class, Phil is Will's inferior. Will determines when and if Phil is deserving of being treated with dignity and certainly that does not happen in the private space of Will's flat. However, Will's orientation towards men does not seem to change in public spaces either.

The Men's Room

The men's room is a public space that offers enough privacy to facilitate sex between men. Lee Edelman argues that the men's room, "through a segmentation of space that can justly be called self-reflexive, gestures, despite the accessibility of that space to a subset of the 'public,' towards an idea of interiority, towards a principle of containment, implicit in the architectural imperative that shapes the subject" ("Men's Room" 152). The men's room segments people in a way that does not provide complete interiority and containment, but gestures towards it. The architecture of the space affects people's relations to each other; everyone who enters the men's room is subject to this segmentation. The urinals especially encourage a specific type of relationship between the people using them. Edelman argues that though the "open display of the glans at the urinal disavows its capacity to occasion desire, the vector of the gaze, however

oblique, remains alert to observe the glance that exposes any interest at all in the glans thus exposed" ("Men's Room" 154). Within a cisnormative framework, the man must have a penis to justify his ability to enter the men's room. The queer man using the urinal must socialize within the men's room as if he were a straight male subject, indifferent to the exposed body parts that might inspire arousal in other settings. For "the law of the men's room decrees that men's dicks be available for public contemplation at the urinal precisely to allow a correlative mandate: that such contemplation must never take place" (Edelman, "Men's Room" 153). Urinals signify an openness to private acts, an openness that is not extended towards other bodily functions that may be performed in the men's room. The bathroom cubicle or lock-up contrasts this openness with a modicum of privacy. Although still within the same room, there are physical structures in place to maintain the privacy of the person using the cubicle, in terms of sight but not necessarily in terms of noise or scent.

Men's rooms—these uncanny spaces that Edelman characterizes as necessarily homoerotic—can also be cruising spaces. They are spaces in which sex can occur between two men somewhat privately, quickly, or furtively. In these spaces, looking is not actively discouraged but is still undertaken with some discretion. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, both Charles and Will describe sexual encounters that occur in men's rooms. Will first speaks to Phil in the Corinthian's locker room, a space similar to the men's room since men undress near each other but the social mores of the space discourage sex. At the Shaft, a gay club in Soho that Will frequents, a "lot of sex went on in the lock-ups" (*SPL* 286). For instance, Will sees his acquaintance Stan having sex in the men's room:

> one evening I had stumbled in for a piss to find Stan fucking a boy just inside the door. He had him with one leg cocked up on a washbasin and as he laid into his ass the bracket

> of the basin was breaking free of the wall, and the kid, who looked the younger and slighter in his giant grasp, rode up and down against his own breath-smeared reflection in the mirror. An ever-growing group of admirers deserted the dance floor and stood around feeling themselves and muttering encouragement. (*SPL* 286)

Will, who is almost exclusively a top, characterizes this act as pleasurable for both Stan and the voyeurs. The men watching Stan fuck the boy—"feeling themselves and muttering encouragement" (*SPL* 286)—are freed from the straight male subjectivity that, Edelman argues, obtains in men's rooms. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the entire men's room becomes a space to celebrate and encourage gay sexuality openly. The boy, while perhaps experiencing the pleasure of sex, is denied the pleasure of spectacle. Like an eroticized Narcissus, he is fucked "against his own breath-smeared reflection in the mirror" (*SPL* 286). Unable to see himself or his admirers, the boy is the object of desire to everyone in the men's room: the sexual object to Stan and the object of the gaze to everyone else.

Will too has sex in a cubicle. After a lengthy disappearance, Will finally spots Arthur on the dance floor of Shaft: "I felt angry—I don't know why—and frightened at my own lack of control" (*SPL* 291). He then approaches Arthur: "I caught up with him on the far side of the dance floor, was on him even before he recognised me, and flung my arms around him; we fell back against the wall, where he held me off a moment to look at me" (*SPL* 291). His forcefulness with Arthur continues as they move to the men's room and find an empty cubicle:

> I had almost no idea what I was doing. I prised open the top stud of his trousers—maroon cords, just as before—yanked down the zip, pulled them round his knees. Seeing again how his cock was held in his little blue briefs I was almost sick with love, fondled it and kissed it through the soft sustaining cotton. Then down they came, and I rubbed his cock

> in my fist. I knew it so well, the thick, short, veined shaft. I weighed it on my tongue, took it in and felt its blunt head against the roof of my mouth, pushing into my throat. Then I let it swing, went behind him, held his cheeks apart, flattened my face between them, tongued his black, sleek, hairless slot, slobbered his asshole and slid in a finger, then two, then three. Long convulsions went through him, indrawn breaths. Tears dripped from his chin on to the stretched encumbrance of his trousers and pants. He was sniffing and gulping. (*SPL* 291)

Having lost him for an extended time, Will reclaims ownership over Arthur, which he attempts to do through sex and domination. He even refrains initially from revealing Arthur's identity to the reader until after their sexual encounter. The reader is not aware that this it is Arthur he sees on the dance floor, as Will only refers to as "A face" (*SPL* 290) or "him" (*SPL* 291). This scene contrasts the spectacle provided by Stan and the boy having sex outside of the cubicle for the pleasure of everyone. Will brings Arthur into the cubicle to finger him to establish that Arthur exists for his pleasure alone. He does not care that Arthur is pained by Will's violation—the resumption of his dominance—and instead ignores Arthur's tears, sniffing, and gulping.

Sex and the Law

The climax of the novel occurs when Will discovers that his grandfather, Denis Beckwith, was an anti-gay legislator who led the "*crusade to eradicate male vice*" (*SPL* 374) in the 1940s and 1950s. These issues of arrest and legality of gay sexuality are first brought up when Will reads one of Charles's diaries. Charles writes: "My case, on account I suppose of my title, had been the subject of more talk than most—though nothing like as much as that of Lord Montagu, which shows all the signs of iniquity and hypocrisy evident in the handling of my

arrest and prosecution, but wickedly aggravated by police corruption" (*SPL* 364). Hollinghurst uses Montagu's name to establish Charles's arrest as part of a pattern of oppression and police corruption at the time. This reference places Charles's arrest in the mid-1950s, between the trial of three men for sexual offences in 1954 and the publication of the Wolfenden report in 1957. The trial of Peter Wildeblood, Michael Pitt-Rivers, and Lord Montagu led to Montagu's imprisonment conspiring to commit indecency with two young airmen on his estate in Dorset (Waters). This trial was part of an escalation of arrests for homosexuality in the late 1940s and 1950s, which resulted in the formation of the Wolfenden Committee. Led by Sir John Wolfenden, this committee initially sought to address the problem of homosexuality but turned out to recommend the decriminalization of some homosexual acts (Lewis 9). In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, James is arrested for soliciting sex with an officer, who was at a bar in plain-clothes. Although the novel takes place in 1983, his arrest is meant to be a reprise of soliciting charges which ran rampant in the 1940s and 1950s—the practice of plain-clothes police officers arresting men at cruising spaces being especially prevalent at the time (Mort 158-65). After learning about James's arrest, Will reveals that he had sex with the same officer and was not arrested.

For some reason, the law does not apply to Will. The novel provides a symbolic explanation for this. Charles writes in his diary:

> I see in *The Times* today that Sir Denis Beckwith, following calls in the House for the reform of sexual offence law, is to leave the DPP's office and take a peerage. Oddly typical of the British way of getting rid of troublemakers by moving them up—implying as it does too some reward for the appalling things he has done. … And he is a man I could hate, the one who more than anybody has been the inspiration of this 'purge' as he

> calls it, this *crusade to eradicate male vice*. (*SPL* 373-74)

Not only does Will learn about his grandfather's role in these arrests, but he learns that his grandfather's viscountcy is entirely the result of homophobia. In a conversation with his brother-in-law Gavin, Will states his shock and embarrassment at learning this fact belatedly: "'I'm so appalled by people knowing all this, and me going prancing around making passes at anything in trousers and not having the remotest inkling'" (*SPL* 380). Will exemplifies the male vice that his grandfather had prosecuted against—in a flat paid for by his grandfather. Realizing this irony forces Will to confront the construction of his own queer lifestyle built on the privileges he has inherited from historic persecution. It also reveals the depth of Will's privilege: he is never adequately punished.

Although Will does not face the legal consequences for his promiscuity the way Charles and James have, he does face a sexual consequence. Will only bottoms once in the novel, and it happens shortly after he discovers his family's history. He looks for Charles at his club, but finds the chef Abdul instead. He then admits to Abdul that he just learned that Charles was arrested in the past. Abdul invites Will into the club's kitchen where they proceed to have sex:

> Abdul tugged my shirt out at the waist, and ill-temperedly opened my fly and pulled my trousers down about my knees. I saw his cock curving and buckling in his pants with anticipation before he turned me round and spread me out. It was one of those worn, foot-thick chopping tables, eaten away by incessant jointings and slicings into a deep, curved declivity. I waited greedily, and yelped as his hand came down, and again and again, tenderising my ass with wild, hard slaps. (*SPL* 376)

The movement into the club's kitchen represents Will's immersion into a working-class space, much like his encounters with Phil in the attic of the hotel. Laying Will on a cutting board, Abdul

dehumanizes him:

> Then he crossed the room in front of me and yanked down from a shelf a catering-size drum of corn oil. It fell cold on my skin as he splashed it from a height then slicked my cheeks and slot, driving a strong unhesitating finger in. I heard the graphic rustle of his clothes, his trousers dropping to the floor with the weight of the keys in his pocket. He fucked me with a thrilling leisured vehemence, giving each long stroke, when it was in to the balls, a final questing shunt that had me gurgling with pleasure and grunting with pain, my cock chafing beneath me against the table's furred and splintered edge. (*SPL* 376-77)

Will's typical role in sexual encounters is reversed: he receives the cock of a black, working-class man. His own cock, usually the one that is satisfied, is put in a painful position on the table's edge.

This passage exemplifies Sinfield's corrective sexual interaction that reverses the dynamics of power in an interracial relationship. When Abdul finishes, "he slurped out of me, and slapped me again. 'Hmm,' he said noncommittally; then, 'Fuck off out of here, man'" (*SPL* 377). Abdul treats Will indifferently, cruelly slapping his ass one last time before sending him away. The irony of this punishment is that it is pleasurable. Amin might claim that Abdul fucking Will is akin to positioning "the black or Arab sexual penetrator as the fetishized instrument through which the white bottom may enjoy temporary release from the burdens of identity via self-shattering" (79). The temporary release does not have a lasting effect on Will, as Abdul is uninterested in Will's education. Amin argues that "in declaring getting butt-fucked by Arabs to be a political act in and of itself, the FHAR [Fron homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire] need not envision Arabs to be either cosigners of their manifesto or potential homosexual

revolutionaries themselves, but only eroticized instruments through which the French gay man might enjoy his punishment for French colonialism" (85). Put in an English context, Will is being punished for two things: English colonialism and his family link to the prosecution of gay men. His identity as an exclusive top, always a dominant figure, is compromised, if not shattered entirely. At the same time, being fucked by Abdul conversely reaffirms the extent of Will's privilege, since even his punishment turns into a source of pleasure. Furthermore, Will's submission is temporary as he is asked to leave Abdul's space. The sex does not actually perform a legal function or reverse the effects that Will and his family have had on gay men and racialized peoples.

Will then responds to recognizing the extent of his own privilege in a more useful way: "I decided that if necessary, and if it might save James, I would testify in court to what I had done with Colin—and so perhaps do something, though distant and symbolic, for Charles, and for Lord B's other victims. I had that more oppressive of feelings—that some test was looming" (*SPL* 402-3). The reader never sees the looming test, but this statement gestures towards a redemptive arc for Will. Despite its sometimes jarring depictions of sex as reflective of the power dynamics between the privileged and the underprivileged, the white and the black, the wealthy and the poor, *The Swimming-Pool Library* is not an anti-sex novel. It occupies an interesting space in the queer literary canon as a novel about gay promiscuity published during the AIDS crisis, when promiscuous sexuality among gay men was often cited as the cause of that crisis (Watney). The novel ends with Will at the gym:

> The few people there looked at each other with considerate curiosity rather than rivalry. There was a sense of various different routines equably overlapping. There were several old boys, one or two perhaps even of Charles's age, and doubtless all with their own

> story, strange and yet oddly comparable, to tell. And going into the showers I saw a suntanned young lad in pale blue trunks that I rather liked the look of. (*SPL* 414-15)

Will no longer sees competition, or rivalry, at the Corinthian. His competitive nature slackens and he adopts curiosity as a mode instead. He looks at the men who are Charles's age and wonders about their stories, and how they may have been impacted by his family. Will therefore has a broader perspective—a deeper appreciation for other people's stories. This new perspective does not deny engaging in casual sex: a sexual encounter with the boy in the blue trunks appears to be in the offing.

Chapter II: "The Strict Obligations of the Teacher's Role": Section 28, Childhood, and Voyeurism in *The Folding Star*

In the manner of Will taking the London Underground at the start of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Edward Manners, the protagonist of Hollinghurst's second novel, *The Folding Star*, takes public transit. At a tram-stop, he asks a man for directions: "He explained politely, in detail, as if it were quite an interest of his; but I didn't take it in. I was charmed by his grey eyes and unnecessary smile, and the flecks of white paint on his nose and his dark-blond hair" (*FS* 3). Edward is fascinated with male features that are indicative of whiteness: grey eyes, flecks of white, blond hair. An English teacher, Edward moves to an unnamed town in Belgium to tutor two students. He falls in love with his seventeen-year-old pupil Luc and becomes obsessed with him—his friends, his habits, his sexuality. Unlike Hollinghurst's other works, *The Folding Star* is set outside the United Kingdom. This turn away from the UK may seem like a complete disavowal of the themes and issues that Hollinghurst explored in his debut novel, but British politics remain at the forefront of the novel.

The Folding Star was published in 1994 and was therefore Hollinghurst's first novel following the enactment of the *Local Government Act 1988*. The twenty-eighth clause in the act, referred to colloquially as Section 28, concerns the "prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material." Section 28 dictates that a "local authority"—understood to be a teacher—shall not "intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality," nor should they "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship." This section of the law attempts to limit discourse surrounding homosexuality by being both specific and intentionally vague. Debbie Epstein argues that Section 28 has never been subject to judicial test

because “it was extremely badly drafted and is probably unenforceable” (387). After interviewing teachers, she concludes that “schools were unable to deal adequately with homophobia or to present homosexuality as acceptable because of worries about breaching Section 28” (Epstein 388). The unenforceability of Section 28 helps rather than hinders its mission. After all, what constitutes the promotion of homosexuality? Which actions promote homosexuality as a “pretended family relationship” while others do not? It would serve teachers to avoid the subject of homosexuality altogether by eliminating the topic from discourse and by preventing young people from realizing its possibilities. What about gay teachers? Does their existence itself actively promote the acceptability of homosexuality? Epstein discusses how Eric Roges, a gay American teacher, “finds himself ‘ricocheting between extremes’, in which his teacher-self is deeply divided from his ‘queer activist-self’. His struggle is to bring these aspects of his life and identity together and he argues strongly for openness towards students about his private life” (392). Roges is calling not just for mere existence but for an openness that educates students about the possibility of queer existence. Section 28 would obviously oppose said openness.

Section 28 is just one branch of Thatcherism. David Monaghan argues that “the most effective opposition to the Conservative government that rules Britain throughout the 1980s was often to be found in the creative arts, particularly in the realm of literature and film” (qtd. in Horton 1). Thatcherism undoubtedly had a significant impact on literature at the time, and it would be short-sighted to think that Thatcherite politics do not play a role in *The Folding Star*. The novel mentions Thatcher once: “I picked up a newspaper someone had left, and skimmed through one or two articles that vaguely interested me, explaining them to him [Cherif] in French—the British Conservatives were ‘desperate for the return of Mrs Thatcher’” (*FS* 32).

Edward's interest in this article reveals an underlying anxiety surrounding Thatcherism: the exploration of homosexuality in the novel is informed by the treatment of homosexuality in the UK under Thatcher's government.

Although it may seem problematic to apply British politics to a novel set in Belgium, *The Folding Star*'s Belgian town serves as a substitute for Britain. The novel lacks Belgian specificity, especially considering the town is unnamed. When Edward enters a gay bar in the town, he imagines he is on home turf: "I was in a place so familiar that I would not have been surprised to see my old friends Danny and Simon" (*FS* 21). The elements that characterized gay bars back home are present here: "There was the same mad delusion of glamour, the same overpriced tawdriness, the same ditsy parochialism and sullen lardy queenery, and underneath it all the same urgency and defiance" (*FS* 21). Hollinghurst draws on a general Euro-queer style to equate the Belgian town to Britain. The town's foreignness—its initial unnavigability—conceals what queer space reveals: Edward's inability to escape the conditions of queerness. The "urgency and defiance" (*FS* 21)—aspects of queer life that are the result of the sociopolitical conditions facing the queer subject—persist in this bar.

On the surface, Hollinghurst's novel about a teacher who seduces his student appears to be an affirmation of the fears articulated in Section 28. Gay teachers, it is thought, indoctrinate impressionable young people into the cult of homosexuality (never mind that people can be gay regardless of how they were socialized or educated in their youth). Yet how should one respond to such an accusation? According to Epstein, "the 'respectable gay', living in a respectable, monogamous relationship, with a life style which closely resembles those of heteronormative couples, should not be the only version of 'gay teacher' allowed to come out to his students" (392). Within such a paradigm, Edward would have to be a respectable gay to combat prejudices

outlined in Section 28, while assuaging the fear of teachers seducing their students into homosexuality; this representation could be somewhat palatable to a heterosexual audience. Instead of providing any such respectable representation, *The Folding Star* is an affront to Section 28 and Thatcherite politics. The novel plays out the fear of a teacher seducing a student and reveals that the resulting issues are not rooted in homosexuality itself but in the social and political conditions affecting homosexuals. This chapter will explore the interconnectivity of sex and politics in the novel by analyzing three major episodes: when Edward goes back to England, when Edward stalks Luc at the beach house, and when Edward has sex with Luc.

The Underwoods of Childhood

The Folding Star is a novel about childhood. Lee Edelman, writing from an American perspective, argues that society is oriented around the figure of the Child as an embodiment of the nation's future. The Child "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman *No Future* 3). The protection of children is an indisputable social benefit. Therefore, any law that prioritizes the protection of children must be inherently good and beyond question. Edelman characterizes this orientation towards the Child as a symptom of reproductive futurism, which consists of "terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (*No Future* 2). Edelman's theory hinges on Americanness as a created identity oriented around futurity: the Child that will come to existence to represent the ideal American citizen. Drawing a distinction between Americanness from Britishness, Simon Watney states that "Britishness

emerges as an *initial* term, rather than a result, possessing a strong power of precedence over and above regional, radical, economic, political and other differences" (64). Britishness is about what already exists, but there must be an ideal British child that continues the tradition. Section 28 therefore works to protect children from the threat of homosexuality, as the homosexual British child would threaten the established precedent.

In Edelman's view, queerness threatens the existence of the Child and its ability to bring about a heteronormative future. Furthermore, "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (Edelman *No Future* 11). Edelman's pronoun "us" refers to two groups. The first is society in general; everyone assumes that the Child is the end all and be all of the social order. The second is the queer subject who is oppressed by—and therefore must oppose—the social order held for the Child, as "the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to signify would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political—their opposition, that is, to the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject" (Edelman *No Future* 13-14). Within such Lacanian parameters, queerness forgoes any sort of futurity; it operates as a death drive bringing about the end of the Child and the end of society. Despite differences between the British and American contexts, Edelman's sociopolitical commentary informs the goal of Section 28: to protect the Child from homosexual threats. Practical application of Edelman's theory, however, is limited. Queers must have a future in order for queerness to survive.

Children are not diametrically opposed to queerness. There are queer children. Eve Sedgwick notes that "the official gay movement has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys" (20). In general, children are excluded from queer political

organizations. This exclusion presents a conundrum, since homosexuality has traditionally been treated as a developmental issue in children. Sedgwick ironically states that "the healthy homosexual is one who (a) is already grown up, and (b) acts masculine" (19). In other words, society determines that children are too young to be queer so they consider any identification with queerness to be premature and unhealthy. Being gay is an inherently adult activity. Yet the gay child represents a larger issue:

> for any given adult gay man, wherever he may be at present on a scale of self-perceived or socially ascribed masculinity (ranging from extremely masculine to extremely feminine), the likelihood is disproportionately high that he will have a childhood history of self-perceived effeminacy, femininity, or non-masculinity … The effeminate boy would come to function as the open secret of many politicized adult gay men. (Sedgwick 20-21)

Every gay man, formerly, was a gay child. Furthermore, Sedgwick notes that, on the one hand, "advice on how to help your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think. On the other hand, the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large" (23). Childhood is a difficult time for queer individuals since so many institutions and organizations work so hard to prevent latent queerness from manifesting itself. There is no hope for the gay adult, who is too far into the homosexualizing process. Instead, the problem must be addressed in childhood, or so conservatives feel.

Kathryn Bond Stockton explores how queer subjects come to consider their own childhoods, arguing that the "child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the

act of adults looking back" (5). When gay adults consider their own childhood, they "may be pricked by, pained by, feelings—about one's childhood—that, even now, are maudlin, earnest, melodramatic, but understandable pangs of despair or sharp unease. One can remember desperately feeling there was simply nowhere to grow" (Stockton 3). Stockton further argues that "the notion of a gay child—however conceptually problematic—may be a throwback to a frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark" (3). The queer child experiences anxiety around non-conformity that indicates a movement towards non-heteronormativity. The question mark arises when the child does not have any conception of gay adult life; therefore, they have no idea what their future will look like. Regardless, the queer child is opposed to growing up "toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness" (Stockton 4). Stockton poses sideways growth as an alternative to the heteronormative track of growing up. Such non-linear growth "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sort" (11). After all, experiencing severe social alienation and having to consider the future are distinctly adult activities that the queer child must partake in. Furthermore, the contact that Stockton describes is anathema to those who believe that queerness, like germs, can be spread. In *The Folding Star*, Edward and Luc are brought into lateral contact due their experiences with queerness. Edward problematically assumes that Luc is not gay for most of the novel, but Luc suspects that Edward is gay. Their coming together at the end of the novel is also a mutual coming out.

The second part of *The Folding Star*—entitled "Underwoods"—depicts Edward going back to England. The prose oscillates between past and present as Edward considers his distant childhood, recent experiences with Luc in Belgium, and his current state while back in England

for his childhood friend Dawn's funeral. The section does not use any chapter breaks, a formal design that further disrupts the reader's sense of timeline or structure during these passages. At one point, Edward connects with Willie, his straight friend from schooldays. Willie states, "'I haven't asked you anything about Belgium and your job and … I don't even know why you went'" (*FS* 239). Edward responds:

> I grinned at him. 'Oh, the usual mixture of panic and caprice—' I couldn't explain to him why this was a place to get out of. I stepped forward with a shiver and slipped my arms round him and hugged him and after a second or two he gave me a comforting rough rub between the shoulderblades. I kissed him on the cheek and then pushily kissed his mouth, until he shook his head away.
>
> 'I can't,' he said. 'I'm sorry. I mean I'm so sorry about everything.' (*FS* 239)

As this fumbling attempt indicates, intimacy seems impossible in England. Dawn, his former lover, has died of AIDS. Willie rebuffs him. England is no longer hospitable to Edward; the effects of Thatcherism and the AIDS crisis have necessitated his leaving.

Edward's represents his childhood through a series of sexual memories. In one passage, he lies down in his childhood bedroom:

> I lay in the dark and jerked off glumly. I thought, here is the room I left Dawn to come back to on all those nights, hotmouthed, clumsy with disguised fatigue but high and alight with love. I could melt still at the memory of his back, when I pulled his shirt over his head, and pressed kisses on his shoulderblades and neck. No one ever looked nicer from behind. His back was the tapered shield, the figure of my love for him, too simple, too confounding to be put into words. (*FS* 200)

Edward masturbates in an attempt to relive his adolescent sexual experiences. The loss of childhood is traumatic: "And what had there been since then? Nothing quite the same. Everything in some way melancholy, frantic or foredoomed" (*FS* 200). Edward now reads a childhood memory of pleasure and tenderness through a negative lens, informed by the trauma he is experiencing in his adult life. Dawn being dead, the intimacy that they shared is now defunct. Edward does not have an object towards which to direct his desire.

Edward reveals that he had his first ever sexual experience with Dawn in the woods: "I was dying for him. He reached down quickly and grabbed my stiff cock. 'What do we have here?' he asked facetiously as I ducked backwards with a giggled gasp of protest" (*FS* 218). Edward's gasp, a vocalization of his disbelief, acts as a form of resistance. His previous encounters with men having been disappointing, he avoids sexual contact. Dawn continues the seduction despite this initial protest: "his hand was still on my shoulder. 'Oh come on,' he said in American, and pulled me slowly backwards towards him. 'I saw you getting a root that time on the train … I had one, too'" (*FS* 218). This experience not only reveals a mutual attraction but a deeper connection between Edward and Dawn: they have similar experiences with sexuality. Dawn being a mirror of Edward's sexual desires is re-enforced by Edward stating this was "the first time I'd ever heard anyone breathe my own thoughts like that" (*FS* 218). The young Edward feels both overwhelmed and relieved to be able to connect with another boy in this manner. This mutual affirmation contributes to Edward's realization that he is gay. The mirroring of desire can be read as narcissistic, but it is vital for Edward's development—the knowledge that he experiences sexuality in the same way another boy does.

Dawn is the dawn of Edward's sexuality. His sexual awakening occurs in England, although English is not a place especially conducive to this type of interaction since they are

limited to the woods. Shortly after they begin to touch, an elderly couple walks by them in the woods. They must hide for a moment, putting their intimacy on pause. Edward is anxious during this time, but they continue as soon as the old couple is out of sight: "We stepped back together and he kissed me with closed lips … It was the gentlest thing I'd ever known from another boy, blasphemous and unhidden. I reached down again and rubbed him through his pants and he just let me" (*FS* 218). Although his reading of their act as blasphemous reveals his internalized homophobia, he enjoys being able to have sex unhidden. Dawn suggests that they move: "'We'd better go under the trees,' he said … I thought to myself, 'But that's where the queers go', imagining some nice distinction between what they did there and whatever we were going to do" (*FS* 218-19). Edward values being unhidden, but Dawn notes the practicality of the situation; that the space under the trees is exactly where they can fulfill their sexual desires. Edward is still a boy and does not accept himself as queer yet. Queerness in this passage is therefore incompatible with childhood since queers—to the child Edward—are the older men who cruise in the woods, not adolescents like him. He instead frames the space as the "dreamy underwoods of love" (*FS* 224), a romanticized hidden space within England where he can act on his queer desires.

If, as Stockton argues, childhood is always condemned to the past, there must always be an end to childhood. Edward describes his childhood as being a time where sexual fantasies were abundant. This changes after he was seduced by Dawn: "Now that I had actually made love, more astonishingly now that I had been made love to, the fantasies were subtly undermined" (*FS* 223). His fantasies up to that point had been fairly abstract, but now he was prospecting about a future with Dawn. He plans to take Dawn to his family vacation home at Kinchin Cove, but these plans fall apart when Edward's father dies. Edward is disappointed by this development:

> Dawn wasn't much bothered about the place I loved and wanted to bring him to as a new brother, who could teach me to dive. He slipped an arm round my neck, gave me a long hard-working kiss and said why didn't we go off together, camping—we could go to France. He'd already opted out of his own family's trip to Spain. I knew with a sudden grave certainty far bleaker than that of my father's death that I would never go to Kinchin Cove again. (*FS* 245)

Edward's queer experience is ultimate abandonment. He posits Dawn as both a lover and—due to his father's death—a brother or surrogate male family member. His father's death signifies the end of childhood—his never going to Kinchin Cove again. Dawn's death severs Edward's connection to childhood as an adult. With the person who led him to become the queer individual he is as an adult dead, Edward loses his childhood entirely. Dawn's idea of going to France is an unfulfilled desire, which Edward fulfills by fleeing from England and moving to Belgium.

Le Voyeur et les Trois

Perhaps the recent loss of childhood contributes to Edward's infatuation with his seventeen-year-old student Luc, who embodies the childish queerness that Edward had experienced himself. Queer desire is a search for the lost self (narcissism) and lost time (temporality). Luc represents both of these to Edward. Unfortunately, they are unable to connect on a more intimate level for most of the novel. Section 28 necessitates distance between Edward and Luc: he cannot express his infatuation with Luc because of social pressures and taboo about relations between men and adolescents. After learning that Luc is going to a beach house with his friends Patrick and Sibylle, Edward decides to follow the three teenagers with his friend Matt. Edward and Matt discuss their mission:

> ‘So we’re going to spy on them.’
>
> ‘Well, how can we? If I go to the beach I’ll be recognised.’
>
> Matt disregarded this. ‘But you want to see him stripped out. You want to know what’s going on with Les Trois’—he took on my term without a flutter—‘and whether your kid’s fucking with the girl or the boy. Or both.’
>
> ‘Or neither.’ (*FS* 103-4)

The stalking is necessary for Edward to learn more about Luc’s sex life—information that cannot be imparted in their capacity as teacher and student. Edward and Matt eventually find the beach house where Luc is staying, a house owned by Patrick’s family called Les Goélands, and camp out in the abandoned house next door. They both stalk Les Trois in different ways: Matt on behalf of Edward on the beach, and Edward through binoculars from the abandoned house. The beach house episode reveals how the social and political conditions affecting homosexuals result in desire being alienated, separated, and unable to be expressed directly.

Matt mediates Edward’s desire for Luc. As Edward’s friend and occasional sex partner, Matt serves a practical purpose during the spying mission: he has a jeep that they use to drive to the beach house, and he will not be recognized by Luc. After spending an afternoon with Les Trois on the beach, Matt reports back to Edward about Luc’s friend Patrick: “‘I’ll tell you something, that boy has got a *whopper*. A total fucking monster between his legs’” (*FS* 106). When Edward asks Matt how he knows this, he responds: “‘He’s running round in these little swimming-things, he’s got this big fat strong arse sticking out the back and this unbelievable package out front. The whole beach was just, like, fixated on it’” (*FS* 106). By contrast, Matt observes that Luc wears long shorts, not a swimsuit. Of course, there is another separation in Luc and Matt’s desire for Patrick: his “little swimming-things” (*FS* 106) cover his genitals and arse,

which necessitates Matt and Luc having to imagine those parts of Patrick's body. Subsequently, the narrative reveals that Sibylle and Patrick are dating, but Sibylle is fixated on Luc, while Luc is fixated on Patrick.

Patrick's "little swimming-things" (*FS* 106) become a fetishized object. Sigmund Freud argues that "a fetish is a substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus, which the little boy once believed in and which—for reasons well known to us—he does not want to give up" (96). Fetishism is defined by displacement, as well as lost or unfulfilled expectations: "in his psyche, yes, the woman still has a penis, but this penis is no longer the same thing as before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its successor, so to speak, and this now inherits all the interest previously devoted to its predecessor" (Freud 96-97). Regarding the mechanism of substitution, Freud further claims that "in later life, the fetishist believes his genital substitute offers yet another advantage. Other people are unaware of its significance and so do not withhold it from him; the fetish is easily accessible and the sexual satisfaction it provides is readily available. What other men have to pursue and strive for presents no such problems for the fetishist" (97). Freud is discussing a hypothetical fetish for the shine of a woman's nose, which makes itself readily available to the fetishist. There are some fetishes that are not as readily available to the fetishist, such as ass, hair, feet, nipples, pieces of underwear, all examples of fetishes that appear in Hollinghurst's novels. Brad Epps connects the fetish to the beyond, arguing that the "beyond informs, paradoxically, a narcissistic, specular relation that is also, in significant ways, a fetishistic relation to an object as always beyond, always lacking, and always in default" (425).

There is a sexual currency to these alienated desires that lie beyond accessibility. Edward meets Matt in the upper floor of the abandoned house: "Matt was kneeling on the low windowsill

and as I came up beside him he tweaked down a slat of the blind and I glanced through with the sudden vertigo of a crane-shot in a film, clear over the tangle of the shrubbery to the long white stoa of Les Goélands and the white steps and the rectangle of sloping lawn" (*FS* 108). The abandoned home offers this view of Les Goélands from afar, with a minimal risk that Luc, Patrick, or Sibylle will notice that they are being watched. Edward's access to this view is restricted by Matt: "He took his finger away as if to say it's there but you can't have it yet. 'So what's my reward?' he said, standing up" (*FS* 108). The reward for Matt driving Edward to Les Goélands, spying on Les Trois on the beach, and finding the abandoned house with the view is not monetary: "I went down and nosed and kissed his balls through the sleek black nothing of his swimming-shorts, and lifted them on my tongue and let them drop … He pushed the shorts down to the top of his thighs and waited with hands clasped on top of his head whilst I tugged his balls free with my lips and tongue and little careful cat-nips of the teeth" (*FS* 108). This sexual act is not an expression of their desire for each other: "I glanced up and he was sighing into the distance as if he could still see Patrick—I knew it was hardly me he wanted" (*FS* 108). Edward desires Luc, while Matt desires Patrick. Neither of these characters can have sex with the people they desire, but since Edward and Matt facilitate each other's desires, they have sex. In this instance, sex is purely functional: since no one is having sex with the person they desire, that desire becomes maddeningly unfulfilled even if the person is physically satisfied. Edward, the primary desirer in the novel, is in the most subjugated position:

> I came after on my knees and licked and pulled and sucked on his balls whilst he stroked himself off and ploughed my hair back over and over with his other hand. Sometimes, my hair tumbled forward and was trapped and yanked in the steady piston of his fist. 'That

> hurt!' I felt like saying, but he was choking both balls into my mouth to swallow on as he came, and I only produced an ill-mannered grunt. (*FS* 108)

Matt's balls are the substitute for the object that Edward actually desires, namely Luc's cock. This fetishization is certainly more beneficial for Matt, who is on the receiving end of the pleasure while causing Edward pain. Their sex therefore reflects their power imbalance. Edward needs Matt more than Matt needs him. By pursuing his impossible desire for Luc, he gives up his sexual power. He is made voiceless, both symbolically through his inability to express his desire for Luc and literally by having Matt's balls choking his mouth.

Edward takes on the role of the voyeur in this setting. The window offers him a vantage point to spy on Les Trois. At one point, he spots Patrick on the lawn: "I tried to make out this famous dick, but he was wearing baggy old cords as he had been the first time I saw him, and a sweatshirt with writing on, not tucked in" (*FS* 111). Matt's desire mediates and fuels Edward's, although his real object remains Luc: "it was Luc's cock I cared about and endlessly imagined. In my fantasies it changed, sometimes modest and strong, something lolloping and heavy-headed, its only constraints an easy foreskin, a certain presence, and a heather-honey beauty to it" (*FS* 111). The voyeur's aspires to give an image to the imagined object of desire. By bringing minute details to his imaginings, Will ensures that his fantasy will consistently shift and therefore sustain his desire. As a voyeur, Edward becomes a non-entity to Luc and Patrick's intimacy. From his hiding place, Edward notices that Luc "stepped out from the house behind Patrick and stood for a moment with an arm round his shoulder […] Surely I couldn't be seen, they would never notice the adjustment of the blind, it was the last thing on earth they would expect. I felt the need and the humiliation at once, and it took a while to learn the voyeur's confidence of being unseen" (*FS* 111).

Earlier in the novel, Edward sees les Trois on the shopping street of the Belgian town: "I stopped where I was, twenty yards off, pressed against the wall, watching their joking and agreements in the doorway with the hunger of a ghost: I felt like a nothing, a mere emanation of weathered bricks and mortar" (*FS* 100). The spying mission reorients Edward's feelings about being a nothing to Luc: at first he feels this negatively, but subsequently his nothing status allows him to take on the role of the voyeur and express his desire for Luc through looking:

> I began to pick up on the odd tempo of the voyeur's day, the scattered sightings, the extended lulls, the great patient investment of time, the eerie, more than social intimacy with figures utterly detached and unconscious of you; they were the twitching puppets of their own routines and whims, immune to your muttered urgings, your baffled telepathy, your shielded stare. (*FS* 112-13)

Edward finds pleasure in looking. Laura Mulvey calls this sort of pleasure fetishistic scopophilia, which is "one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones" and consists of "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (8). In other words, looking is sexy. Luc's not knowing that Edward is looking at him is even sexier. Edward finds pleasure in holding some form of power over Luc, comparing his acts of looking favourably to normative social intimacy.

Mulvey, discussing the gaze, details how the conditions of cinema encourage a specific type of voyeurism: "the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (9). Sitting in a movie theatre is inherently voyeuristic:

> the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema *is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism* and projection of the repressed desire on to the performer. (Mulvey 9)

Since isolation heightens voyeuristic pleasure, Edward's status as a nothing is one of the conditions that allows him to take on his role as a voyeur.

Voyeurism satisfies Edward's desire for Luc to some degree. He spies on Luc from the sunroom through binoculars: "I studied his naked brown back more closely than I had ever studied anything—the wide plates of his shoulderblades, the slight boyish dip between as he leant on his elbows, traces of pink scratches on the shoulders, the shaped, back-swept golden hair stacked in the embroidered sling of the shades-band" (*FS* 115). The binoculars allow Edward to pleasure himself by looking at intimate details of Luc's body. However, the conditions of his voyeurism cause him to lose some perspective in his spatiality: "When I put down the binoculars to take off my trousers I was confused to find myself indoors, in another house, and not kneeling just behind his open legs ready to fuck him or tickle his feet" (*FS* 115). Edward discovers the limits of scopophilia: the spectator who is looking in on a private world is limited to looking. He has to come to terms with his spatial separation from Luc: the fact that he can observe Luc's body intimately but cannot be intimate with Luc. Edward feels overwhelmed by his vision:

> I can't go on about the next hour. Luc on the grass in his shallow blue shorts, rather discreet; the tan-lines of the summer, of his red ducks and of longer shorts than these,

> marking comical sexy stages up his long legs to the whiteness I just glimpsed where the hem rode high by a finger's breadth on the rise of his buttocks. Already the little creases and blue nodes of veins on his inner thighs. Nothing about his cock, but a couple of seconds' vision of crinkled scrotum (I may have imagined that). (*FS* 115)

Although Edward subjects Luc to a "controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 8), he does not actually control Luc through that gaze. It is Luc who—by unknowingly teasing Edward with visions of his body—controls Edward's sexual fantasies by giving image to his gaze.

Edward, however, is not just looking: "I knelt there teasing the air with my tongue and teeth, and working my jaw in imaginary kisses" (*FS* 115). Edward's voyeurism condenses the space between him and Luc. Luc's body is not just a faraway object; Edward interacts with it in his imagination. Edward reflects on this the next day, when he sees Luc again, "Only yesterday I'd come twice across his naked legs—or rather, on to a cushioned window-seat and a sprawl of time-crinkled TV magazines in a derelict house—but still it had seemed to me as if we had made love, the intimacy was so prolonged and detailed; I knew his body better than he did himself" (*FS* 117-18). Not only does Edward feels a new sense of intimacy with Luc, but his arousal comes from having more knowledge than Luc. First, there is the knowledge of his looking while Luc does not know. Second, there is the knowledge of the details of Luc's body that (Edward believes) Luc himself does not know. Given how Edward, as a teacher, uses knowledge to establish himself as an authority figure, he makes himself an authority of Luc's body. He notes the power imbalance between himself and Luc that he has created: "I saw now that it wasn't quite fair, incredibly he didn't know, he'd been reading and listening to music at the time" (*FS* 118). Luc's reading, as part of his homework for Edward's lessons, further illustrates the authority he holds over Luc in both mind and body. Edward's voyeurism denies Luc his

subjectivity or his involvement in Edward's sexual fantasies. His inability to communicate his desire reduces Luc to the status of an object.

Edward compensates for the distance between himself and Luc through stealing and fetishizing his clothes. He uses the Altidores' bathroom and sees

> a gingham-lined clothes-basked with a lid … There were some white Hom briefs, tiny, damp from a towel they were bundled in with. I picked them out and covered my face with them. They seemed spotless, hardly worth changing for new ones, with only a ghost of a smell. When I rolled them up they were almost hidden in my fist. I buried them at the bottom of the basket, but then some awful compulsion made me plunge my arm in for them again. (*FS* 145)

The white briefs mediate Edward's desire. Since Freud states that "pieces of underwear, so commonly adopted as fetishes, capture the moment of undressing, the last point at which the woman could still be regarded as phallic" (98), the process of undressing becomes a moment to savour. Edward certainly fetishizes underwear, but the dynamic is different. Whereas Freud describes a moment of fetishizing prior to nudity, Edward is concerned with Luc naked. Edward wants to press his face against Luc's cock and balls, but instead compensates by using the underwear as a displaced object that had already been in contact with Luc's genitals.

The white briefs capture the moment after dressing. Edward later takes this one step further by wearing the briefs: "I had a hard-on myself at the grip of Luc's tight little knickers and the feeling the hard-ons he must have had pushing against the very cotton that now constrained mine and his balls thoughtlessly snuggled there all day long" (*FS* 157). Desiring Luc through his clothing, Edward explains fetishism in his own terms: "'It's a kind of alchemy really. You take something of only slight practical value, but give it a magically arousing association, even if of a

kind most people would consider revolting, and you're minting gold'" (*FS* 157). Luc's white briefs are just that: white briefs. But Edward ties them to a larger meaning of physical intimacy with Luc, which gives them their fetish value. Edward's alienated desire for Luc, which must be acted out clandestinely through voyeurism and clothes stealing, is the direct result of his inability to express his feelings to Luc in his capacity as Luc's teacher. Although he finds different ways to compensate for this alienation, he can only find satisfaction once he is able to act on his desire by having sex with Luc.

Escaping Edward's Subjectivity

Edward eventually does have sex with Luc. When he sees Luc with Patrick and Sibylle at Cassette, the local gay bar in the Belgian town, he reflects on his role as Luc's teacher, which he wants to supersede: "I longed to be who I was, to be natural and funny, but I knew I was doomed to be someone else by the violence of my needs and enigmatic little circuits of the Three" (*FS* 318). This is not exactly true as, prior to coming to Cassette, Luc bets against Patrick and Sibylle that Edward will be there, indicating that Luc was sure whereas the other two were doubtful. Luc knows that Edward is gay, which indicates that he has a greater knowledge of homosexuality than Edward thinks. Regardless, Patrick and Sibylle's presence limits Edward's ability to be himself around Luc. They eventually leave, allowing for Edward and Luc to interact with this newfound information. At first, they make small talk and avoid communicating directly.

When Luc goes to the men's room, Edward reacts with erotic longing: "I watched him wandering to the far end of the room, pushing his hair back, sweetly self-conscious under twenty pairs of eyes. I was blasted with lust. I thought why don't you just go on me, hose me down, unbutton my fly, slip your dick in and piss my pants … why *don't* you?" (*FS* 324). Edward's

relationship to the abject in this passage distinguishes him from Will in *The Swimming-Pool Library*; rather than asserting his power over Luc, he wants to be subjugated by Luc and tend to his needs. The men's room in *The Folding Star* is not an opportunistic cruising spot, but a space of escape. When Edward brings Luc to his apartment, Luc goes to the bathroom again: "'I'm afraid it's the gentlemen's again,' he said, groping for the floor with his drink and surging out of the chair. I showed him where and he went in and slammed the door as if I might want to help. I came back into the room so as not to torture myself with hearing" (*FS* 333-34). The piss adds tension on Edward's part—Luc briefly abstracting himself from Edward's presence causes Edward's longing for Luc to intensify and become torturous. Luc meanwhile treats Edward's bathroom like a public space—referring to it as "the gentlemen's (*FS* 333)—perhaps in an attempt to diffuse the tension of being in Edward's apartment and possibly having sex.

Edward and Luc's intimacy begins when Luc returns from the bathroom. He immediately hugs Edward—then Hollinghurst skips to a moment after they have had sex: "Luc was asleep. I lay propped up beside him, thinking of later days in our affair, unguessed afternoons of sex, drives beside long canals, his cock curving out of his fly in the car, high-summer lulls when we lay like soldiers under Flanders willows and poplars, shirts off, watching clouds drift in the canal, his crude obsessive demands" (*FS* 334). Hollinghurst's denial of the present is frustrating to the reader who has anticipated this sex for the duration of the novel. Yet this forecast of the future serves a particular function: by placing sex with Luc as already over, it becomes another moment of Edward's that is condemned to the past. The climax of the novel becomes a moment of loss rather than success or gain. Similar to his feelings after being seduced by Dawn, Edward experiences some grief after seducing Luc: "Tears slipped down my face, I didn't really know why—it felt like gratitude, but also they were the tears that register some deep displacement, a

bereavement sending up its sudden choking wave. It struck me I must be mourning everything that came before—it was the desolate undertow of success" (*FS* 335). Edward experiences the death of fantasy once again. Desire fulfilled is desire relegated to the past. Edward wants Luc as a love object rather than a partner. Now that he has had sex with Luc, he can no longer experience the erotic pleasures of looking—scopophilia—in the same way.

When Edward's fantasies come to an end, so does Luc. Luc disappears and he is never found. This development takes on thematic significance insofar as Luc has never been a character who exists in his own right: he has always been a manifestation of Edward's sexual desires and fantasies. The final passage in *The Folding Star* recounts Edward seeing a photograph of Luc on a missing person's bulletin:

> He looked hollow-cheeked, eyes narrowed in hurt and defiance; I felt he had been robbed of his beauty, and that I would hardly have singled him out from the other kids around him. He had become a victim, to be stared at and pitied, to provoke pity for his family and friends—and just at the moment when his future was clearing like hills in the first light, to be ready for him when he woke. I stood in front of him and repeated his name, though I knew he couldn't see me, or recall the night he had taken my life in his arms. He gazed past me, as if in a truer kinship with the shiftless sea. (*FS* 422)

By disappearing, Luc takes himself out of Edward's subjectivity and erotic compulsion. He is now seen as a victim by Edward, but he had already been a victim of a queer childhood he found painful. When he had confessed his love for Patrick to Edward, Edward had seduced him instead of offering the teacherly compassion that Luc may have been looking for. When Luc has sex with Edward, he becomes an object used for Edward's pleasure. Edward observes Luc's asshole: "It was bolder and more beautiful than I expected, the flare of it as he leant forward to play

clumsily with my cock. I stroked his pucker with a knuckle, longing to lick—I breathed on it, sort of whistled as if cooling something. It had a pretty, spoilt expression, a puzzled pout" (*FS* 336). He treats Luc's asshole as an object of its own, as if it is disconnected from Luc himself:

> I kissed all around it, decoyed my tongue all down his raised thigh, came back and tried it with a licked thumb. There was a kind of pride in him as well as me; he would take whatever I gave him. I felt for a second or two the strict obligations of the teacher's role, then doubted, as my thumb slipped in to the first, then the second knuckle, whilst he complained and jacked his cock fiercely in his hand, if he had anything left to learn. (*FS* 336)

Edward no longer sees Luc as his student or pupil, as his treatment of Luc in their sexual encounter foregoes the teacher-and-student relationship that had preceded their having sex. He assumes that Luc's education is complete; their sexual relationship ends their pedagogical relationship. Whereas Dawn strokes Edward's cock when they have sex in the woods, Luc strokes his own cock, a difference that Edward does not appear to notice. Since he is both complaining and masturbating, perhaps Luc does not actually enjoy the sex and he is masturbating as a coping mechanism—an attempt to reclaim pleasure from painful sex. Since the novel disallows Luc's point of view, his reactions must remain conjectural.

In any event, Edward is not particularly concerned with Luc's pleasure. He notices that sex is painful for Luc:

> I fucked him across the armchair, his feet over his shoulders; I had to see his face and read what I was doing in his winces and gasps, his violent blush as I forced my cock in, the quick confusion of welcome and repulsion […] I saw tears slide back from the

> corners of his eyes, his upper lip curled back in a gesture like anguish or goaded aggression. His hand flickered up against my chest to stay me or slow me. (*FS* 337)

Regardless of Luc's responses, Edward does not stop or slow down. The confusion of welcome and repulsion is Edward's projection onto Luc. Edward's indifference towards Luc's pleasure becomes a desire to hurt him:

> I was mad with love; and only half-aware, as the rhythm of the fuck took hold, of a deaf desire to hurt him, to watch a punishment inflicted and pay him back for what he'd done to me, the expense and humiliations of so many weeks. I saw the pleasure start up inside for him, as if he didn't expect it, his cock grew hard again in two seconds, his mouth slackened, but I made him flinch with steeper little thrusts. (*FS* 337)

This passage focuses on Edward's subjectivity alone. The "punishment" (*FS* 337) that Luc had apparently inflicted on Edward was actually self-inflicted due to Edward's projections. Edward externalizes his frustrations through heedless sex:

> I was up on the chair, fucking him […] I had a dim sense of protest, postponed as if he wasn't quite sure, he was folded in two, powerless, the breath was pushed out of him, there was just the slicked and rubbered pumping of my cock in his arse, his stoppered little farts. His chest, his face, were smeared with sweat, but it was mine: the water poured off me like a boxer, my soaked hair fell forward and stung my eyes. (*FS* 337)

Luc is not only powerless but speechless and denied subjectivity. He is completely covered in Edward's sweat, a reversal of Edward's earlier desire to be covered in Luc's piss. Luc's powerlessness and voicelessness in this passage signifies that he had begun to disappear already while having sex with Edward.

On one hand, *The Folding Star* stands as an affront to Section 28 and Thatcherite values by depicting a young male student being seduced by an older man, his teacher. Yet the relationship between the teacher and student is not a positive one; it does not promote the possibility of a queer future. Instead, Luc disappears. The negative aspects of Edward's treatment of Luc are not entirely the result of Edward's character, but of the social and political circumstances affecting his queer identity. *The Folding Star* is largely a novel about childhood trauma and sexual repression. It argues that when sexual repression is prolonged, the resulting sexual encounter is not a positive experience. *The Folding Star* evades addressing Thatcherism directly, but it was undoubtedly shaped by Thatcherite politics and the political conditions of Britain at the time it was written. Hollinghurst saves his direct address of Thatcherism for his fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty*, which was published in 2004 but uncoincidentally returns to the 1980s.

Chapter III: "It's Those Blue Eyes": Desire, Power, and Politics in *The Line of Beauty*

Nick Guest, the protagonist of Hollinghurst's fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty*, goes on his first date with a man named Leo. For the meeting, he chooses a straight pub in Notting Hill, near his accommodation on Kensington Park Gardens. This space poses a challenge. Nick finds "himself wondering how they looked and sounded to the people around them, the couple beside them at the table. It was all getting noisier as the evening went on, with a vague sense of heterosexual threat" (*LB* 29). The heterosexual threat hinders the potential physical intimacy between the two men: "Nick guessed Leo's other dates would have met him in a gay pub, but he had flunked that further challenge. Now he regretted the freedom he would have had there. He wanted to stroke Leo's cheek and kiss him, with a sigh of surrender" (*LB* 29). The date goes well. Nick suggests going to Leo's place, but they cannot as Leo is closeted and lives with his religious mother. Leo suggests going to Nick's place, only Nick's place on Kensington Park Gardens is not his own. He lives as a lodger in the Feddens' house, the Feddens being a posh family headed by Gerald, a Conservative MP. While at Oxford, Nick befriended Gerald's son Toby, who suggested that Nick stay with them after graduation. This unorthodox living situation leaves Nick and Leo without places of their own.

The space where Nick and Leo can go to have sex is the communal gardens behind the Feddens' house. The gardens are as "as much a part of Nick's romance of London as the house itself: big as the central park of some European city, but private, and densely hedged on three sides with holly and shrubbery behind high Victorian railings" (*LB* 13). Public sex figures in Hollinghurst's other novels, yet the communal garden is distinguished from the men's rooms in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and the public park in *The Folding Star* because it offers only a simulacrum of public space. Its resemblance to a European city park contrasts with its lack of

access. One needs to be a keyholder, living in one of the grand white townhouses, to enter this space. The hedges offer further privacy insofar as those walking around the gardens cannot see inside. This renders the garden an ideal space to have outdoor sex: "He unlocked the gate and let Leo go in ahead of him. 'Cycling isn't permitted in the gardens, but I dare say you can walk your bike.' Leo hadn't learnt his mock-pompous tone yet. 'I dare say bumshoving isn't permitted either,' he said. The gate closed behind them, an oiled click, and they were together in the near-darkness of the shrubbery" (*LB* 33). The heterosexual threat of the outside world is barred by the gates closing behind them, which is ironic considering their having sex is likely not permitted either. Nick reflects on Leo's choice of words: "Bumshoving was unambiguous, and encouraging, but not romantic exactly" (*LB* 33). There is a crudeness to the term that reveals a hierarchy of sex: sex in the garden would be bad, but anal sex between two men in the garden would be worse.

Nevertheless, they fuck in the semi-private garden. At this point, it is not the act of sex alone that thrills Nick:

> he loved the scandalous idea of what he was doing more perhaps than the actual sensations and the dull very private smell. He twisted his own pants down to his knees, and smiled at the liberated bounce of his dick in the cool night air, and kissed his smile into Leo's sphincter. Then when he fucked Leo, which was what he did next, a sensation as interesting as it was delicious, he couldn't help laughing quietly. (*LB* 36)

The sensorial experience of sex, including the smell of it, does not thrill Nick as much as the liberation of his dick, his unadulterated happiness while rimming Leo, and the very act of fucking in this space that is both private and public. Any resident of Kensington Park Gardens could potentially catch them in the act. Nick's feelings about the privacy shift: "just before he

came he had a brief vision of himself, as if the trees and bushes had rolled away and all the lights of London shone in on him" (*LB* 36). Sex becomes a spectacle and an accomplishment. But what exactly is being accomplished by having sex in this space? It may be an affront to the privileged and wealthy who would otherwise occupy this garden.

Shortly after the act, Leo pisses on the lawn. Urine is a motif in Hollinghurst's oeuvre. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Will establishes his dominance on Phil by fucking him in a puddle of his own piss. In *The Folding Star*, Luc goes to the men's room in the Cassette to pee and leaves Edward feeling excluded from intimacy. Leo pissing on the lawn of the communal garden represents *The Line of Beauty*'s mission, namely to bring the reader into the exclusive world of London society under Thatcherism through a queer lens, while metaphorically pissing all over its institutions. Leo pisses on the lawn but Nick does not. Nick demonstrates more reverence for the Feddens' space. Moreover, he tries to belong in it. This chapter explores the relationship between sex and politics in *The Line of Beauty* through analysis of Nick's relationships with the two men of the Fedden family: Toby, Nick's Oxford friend, and Gerald, who is obsessed by Margaret Thatcher. Furthermore, I will analyze Nick's sexual proclivities—which provide the basis of all of his relationships—through a psychoanalytic lens, the relationship between sex and power, the nature of relationships between men, and the engagement with Thatcherism and the conservative politics of 1980s Britain.

Toby

Although Nick moves to London to pursue graduate studies at UCL, Oxford maintains a meaningful presence in the narrative. In this regard, Hollinghurst expands the genre known as the campus novel; *The Line of Beauty* being a post-varsity novel due to its post-Oxford setting. Aida

Edemariam argues that, in literature, “the attractions of the campus haven’t changed much: it is a finite, enclosed space, like a boarding school” (154). Unfettered by the restrictions of childhood that characterize the boarding school experience, the campus becomes a place where new adults engage in practices of self-discovery and establish relations with one another. In David Lodge’s view, campuses provide “an element of entertaining artifice, of escape from the everyday world” (qtd. in Edemariam 156). In an essay on *Brideshead Revisited*, Jay Dickson discusses the varsity novel as a subgenre of the campus novel, which is specifically about the experience of young men attending an Oxbridge college. He argues that this “subgenre is unlike classic *Bildungsromans* insofar as protagonists undergo their development more or less at a leisured remove from economic hardship, protected as they are by the wealth and privilege of their university surroundings.” The development of the protagonist not being tied to economic gain, the growth of the protagonist occurs instead in his affective life: “these novels document the education of the sentiments: of sensory pleasures, to be sure, such as taste and touch and sight, but also of aesthetic experience. More important, the varsity novel also offers instruction in the ways of higher feelings such as love” (Dickson). The varsity novel is primarily concerned with the discovery of pleasures; one of those pleasures comes in the form of social experience. According to Dickson, “if the ostensible schooling offered by the dons was not adequate preparation for life, one would instead learn from being near the best and the brightest—as well as the richest and the best born—the importance of the homosocial bonds that sustained the Empire.” This genre is Oxbridge-specific since it imbues the students on those particular campuses with great expectations: they represent the best of Britain, the future of the nation. As such, with access to wealth and privilege, “protagonists in varsity novels learn to appreciate fine

wines, good food, tasteful clothes, and pleasures to be felt from the arts" (Dickson), such as Charles Ryder discovers in his friendship with Sebastian Flyte.

Brideshead Revisited does not stay in Oxford: "the move from Oxford to Brideshead Castle is necessary for the completion of Charles's education" (Dickson). Waugh characterizes Oxford as an institutional country house, which lends itself to the representation of an actual country house: "the relocation to Brideshead Castle is explicitly cast in terms of furthering Charles's 'aesthetic education'" (Dickson). Whereas Waugh uses Oxford as a starting point for Charles's education, Hollinghurst forgoes Oxford altogether. In *The Line of Beauty*, the analogous relationship to Charles and Sebastian occurs between Nick and Toby. Toby may be the more privileged and wealthy man, but Nick is more knowledgeable about the arts. It is also unclear if there is a pedagogical nature to their friendship characteristic of the varsity novel. Whether from an impulse of paternal stupidity or professional deniability, Gerald tells Nick: "'I don't think he [Toby] knew anything about you'" (*LB* 419).

The friendship between Nick and Toby has a vague origin. Nick was not part of the same secret society as Toby; he appears to be detached from the rest of Toby's friends when they are all together at Toby's birthday party, characterized as an Oxford reunion. The friendship is nevertheless important for Nick's aesthetic education because it grants him access to the world of the privileged and wealthy. This education is not completed in the environment of a country home, but in the Feddens' house in London. In this sense, *The Line of Beauty* is a post-varsity novel. It follows the protagonist's sentimental education in the real world, post-Oxford, but Oxford maintains a ghostly presence. Toby gives a speech at his birthday party:

> He made various jokes such as 'Sam will need two pairs of trousers' and 'No more crème de menthe for Mary,' which clearly alluded to old disgraces, and began to bore the MPs.

> Nick sensed a touching nostalgia for the Oxford years, on which a door, an oak perhaps, seemed gently but firmly to have closed. He himself was not referred to; but he took this as a sign of intimacy. (*LB* 64-65)

Nick's interpretation of omission as intimacy may be delusion. He was not part of Toby's Oxford as much as he claims to be—if at all. He assumes a greater intimacy with Toby than ever existed.

Perhaps Nick now lives with the Feddens to compensate for his earlier failure in belonging in Toby's Oxford. The norms of the homosocial bonds among Oxford men cause Toby to inadvertently reveal Nick's position in upper society: he yells "'Hey, Guest!'" (*LB* 100) as opposed to "Hey, Nick!" when he sees Nick on Portobello Road, reinforcing the role that Hollinghurst imposes upon Nick: a guest in this world, from the perspective of men like Toby, despite their friendship. There is another failure, or unrealized potential, in Nick and Toby's friendship. Dickson argues that "part of the pleasures described in [varsity novels] are the forging of close intimacies with classmates, sometimes remaining chastely convivial […] and sometimes blossoming into full erotic intimacy." In *Brideshead Revisited*, there is erotic potential between Charles and Sebastian which then gets displaced onto Charles having sex with Sebastian's sister Julia: "Charles's own inability to extend and sustain his *philia* with the rest of the Flytes recurs throughout the final portion of the novel, paralleling his failure to do so with Sebastian" (Dickson). *The Line of Beauty* similarly explores what happens when the erotic potential of a friendship is not fully realized while at Oxford. Toby invites Nick to stay at his family home in London but "in these months after Oxford he was rarely there" (*LB* 4).

Nick desires Toby—he wants to have sex with him—but, since Toby is heterosexual, it is impossible for him to fulfill this desire. He moves into the Feddens' house to get closer to Toby, but this turns out to be futile since Toby no longer lives in the house, although his "half-dressed

presence still haunted the attic passage" (*LB* 4). If Nick cannot have Toby, he may as well be in vicinity of where Toby would be. Toby habitually exposes himself to Nick's appraising eye, as when Toby "would go into the garden and pull his shirt off impatiently and sprawl in a deckchair reading the sport in the *Telegraph*. Nick would see him from the balcony and go down to join him, slightly breathless, knowing Toby quite liked his rower's body to be looked at" (*LB* 5). Looking characterizes Nick's relationship with Toby: "he had first seen Toby in the porter's lodge and felt a sudden obliviousness of everything else" (*LB* 49). This first sighting, tied to the experience of Oxford, is characteristic of the varsity novel and the singularity of the primary male homosocial relation.

It also foregrounds the prominence of sight in their relationship. Unable to have sex with Toby, Nick channels his attraction into the act of looking. He has "never done more than hug Toby or kiss him on the cheek" (*LB* 135). Otherwise, he has "twice had a peep at his penis at the college urinal" (*LB* 135), and he has "watched Toby getting out [of the pool] with a magnificent jump and shake of his big unsuspecting backside" (*LB* 285). With this scene in mind, Nick masturbates while thinking about Toby: "only time [I] saw him naked … great innocent rower's arse" (*LB* 231). A top, Nick fixates on men's backsides throughout the novel. He occasionally finds pleasure in viewing a man's penis, but the instances in which this happens are far outweighed by his proclivity for backsides. When he and his lover Wani—who is always the insertee in their sexual relations—both pursue the waiter Tristão, Wani "felt his cock and Nick felt his arse" (*LB* 338). There is a peculiarity in this fixation since he describes Toby's backside as "unsuspecting" (*LB* 285) or "innocent" (*LB* 231). At another point in the novel, he looks at Toby with "unguessed emotions" (*LB* 6). Nick projects that Toby enjoys being looked at but is

unaware of the extent to which Nick is attracted to him. This projection serves Nick's fantasy; he takes pleasure in the fact that Toby does not know that he wants to penetrate him.

There is an element of power in looking. John Berger, writing about the nude in art history, argues that a "man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies" while a "woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste—indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence" (45-46). The woman is always the subject of the gaze. Nudity adds another dimension to this relationship: "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object)" (Berger 54). The body becomes an object to use and enjoy—perhaps to fuck—when it is seen as a nude:

> In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger—with his clothes still on. (Berger 54)

The Line of Beauty is a visual novel and, although it is written in the third person, the prose operates like a camera filtered through Nick's perspective. This choice has consequences. The reader is aware that Nick is a minor character in the lives of Toby and the Feddens, but this narrative technique obscures that fact. It also renders the men who appear naked in the novel as existing for Nick's pleasure; in Berger's terms, their bodies are addressed to him.

The issue of spectatorship in art is an ongoing concern for Hollinghurst. His review of

Patricia Lee Rubin's *Seen from Behind: Perspectives on the Male Body and Renaissance Art* focuses on representations of the male backside:

> 'At last!' was my first reaction to this book: at last a scholarly treatment of a subject I've been noticing, pondering and mentally anthologising for much of my life. It's partly a gay thing, no doubt, to clock the backside of a marble Jason or painted gondolier, surfaces and volumes that polite analysis seems not to register, and to speculate about those artists seemingly fixated by them. ("Gazing at the Moon")

The works of art that Rubin discusses are occasionally queered by spectatorship: a queer spectator feels a sexual proclivity towards the backside represented in art. By comparison, Berger's analysis is unsurprisingly heteronormative: "Women are depicted in quite a different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine— but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (64). Within this framework, if the man is posed as the object of desire, he is necessarily feminized. *The Line of Beauty* instead maintains the masculinity of the men Nick gazes at, but the relationship between himself as spectator and the man as object is maintained.

Berger equates spectatorship to ownership, occasionally using the term "spectator-owner" (56) to distinguish the spectator of the nude from the occasional male lover in the artwork. He writes: "sometimes a painting includes a male lover. But the woman's attention is very rarely directed towards him. Often she looks away from him or she looks out of the picture towards the one who considers himself her true lover" (Berger 56). The spectator-owner is the "sexual protagonist" (56) in the encounter between man and artwork. Nick is certainly the sexual protagonist in *The Line of Beauty*. When Nick stumbles into an after-party in Toby's bedroom at Hawkeswood, the scene is laid out like a piece of renaissance art:

> He looked in at the door of Toby's bedroom. A group of his friends had come up here when the music stopped at two, and they seemed lazily to assess him. 'Come in and close the door, for god's sake,' said Toby, beckoning from the vast bed where he was propped up among sprawling friends. He had been given the King's Room, where Edward VII had slept—the swags of blue silk above the bedhead were gathered into a vaguely comic gilded crown. (*LB* 76-77)

From Nick's vantage, Toby is the centre of this composition, his sprawling friends surrounding him, propping him up, decoration laid out to make Toby stand out from the crowd. Hollinghurst adds one more detail: "On the opposite wall hung a comfortable Renoir nude" (*LB* 77). The Renoir nude reinforces the Feddens' opulence, but it is also an object meant for Toby's gaze. It is unclear what is exactly "comfortable" about the nude. It could be Toby's comfort with gazing at this nude, presumably female. Toby, in his relation to the Renoir painting, maintains his role as spectator-owner while the nude is the object. Nick, in his description of the events, reverses the gender implications of the scene:

> Toby was king tonight, on his great big bed, and his friends for once were his subjects. He was acting the role with high spirits, in a childishly approximate way. Nick found it very touching and exciting. As the pot took its delayed effect, squeezing and freeing like some psychic massage, he reached back and took Toby's hand, and they lolled there like that for thirty or forty seconds of heaven. It was as if the room had been steeped in a mood of amorous hilarity as sweetly unignorable as 'Je Promets' [Nick's cologne]. He recalled what Polly had said in the garden long before, and thought that maybe, at last, for once, Toby would actually be his. (*LB* 78)

There is an element of promise to the bedroom scene. Toby is the king and Nick is one of his subjects, but the intoxicating energy of the night, aided by marijuana, suggests that he could claim ownership of Toby.

Nick becomes a spectator-owner instead. In one passage he is in bed masturbating: "Toby of three years ago … at Hawkeswood … morning after the great party … calling him into the King's Room, sweaty with hangover under one roiled sheet … 'Fuck, what a night…!' and then he darted to the bathroom … only time he saw him naked" (*LB* 231). Hollinghurst uses free indirect discourse to tie the narration to Nick's subjectivity, representing his scattered thoughts while presumably stroking his cock and fantasizing. Nick applies a queer gaze on Toby's body. Like the Renoir painting, Toby becomes the nude meant for Nick's gaze. Another way in which Nick claims ownership over Toby's body is committing Toby's body to memory. Hollinghurst only chooses to reveal this nude moment in retrospect, not as part of the sequence actually set in Hawkeswood. The nude Toby becomes part of Nick's collections of images to conjure when he wants to masturbate. Toby's body remains beyond access, but the image of it is now more available to Nick.

Perhaps Nick's desire for Toby takes on a destructive element. Sianne Ngai, writing on feminist critiques of penis envy, argues that critics focus on envy "as a term describing a *subject* who lacks, rather than the subject's affective *response* to a perceived inequality" (126). As a result, critics view envy "as saying something about the subject's internal state of affairs ('deficiency') as opposed to a statement by or from the subject concerning a relation in the external world" (Ngai 126). Envy—a form of desire—is not about the lack, but about inequality. According to Ngai, envy can be a consequence of economic inequality. Being envious is a bad trait: "Moralized and uglified to such an extent that it becomes shameful to the subject who

experiences it, envy also becomes stripped of its potential critical agency—as an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of in-equality" (Ngai 129). If envy is a response to institutionalized forms of inequality, why does literature treat it as a bad thing? Perhaps because it still is. To be envious is to admire those who benefit from inequality; to subscribe to the institution that enforces—or perhaps relies on—economic disparity. For example, Nick's envy of the Fedden family for their privilege and wealth. Søren Kierkegaard compares envy to admiration: "admiration is happy self-abandon; envy, unhappy self-assertion" (qtd. in Ngai 130). Ngai builds on Kierkegaard's theory by analyzing mimesis as an expression of envy. She focuses on the dialectic of identification and desire, "the relationship between 'wanting to be' and 'wanting to have'" (Ngai 139). Analyzing the mimetic relationship from the 1992 psychological horror film *Single White Female*, in which a woman (Hedy) develops an obsession with another woman (Allie) and tries to become just like her, Ngai writes that female emulation is "represented in the film as an unstable mode of admiration that easily slides into aggression, or, more specifically, as a mimetic behavior that initiates a trajectory: from the reverence of an ideal to full-blown antagonism toward the subject embodying that ideal" (141). The initial idealization of the admired object is replaced by antagonism. Beyond mimesis, what does the envious person do to their idealized object? Melanie Klein argues that "it is only once the ideal object is envied that it becomes viewed as persecutory—a view that in turn mobilizes the subject's efforts to criticize and transform it, and transform its value or status as property in particular, spoiling it and 'rob[bing] it of what it possesses'" (qtd. in Ngai 163). In other words: the idealized object must be destroyed.

The identification/desire dialectic brings up interesting questions regarding *The Line of Beauty*. Does Nick want to fuck Toby, or does he want to become Toby? The answer is yes, on

both accounts. Hollinghurst begins the novel by revealing Nick's orientation to the space of the Feddens' house: "His room was up in the roof, still clearly the children's zone, with its lingering mood of teenage secrets and rebellions. Toby's orderly den was at the top of the stairs, Nick's room just along the skylit landing, and Catherine's at the far end; Nick had no brothers or sisters but he was able to think of himself here as a lost middle child" (*LB* 4). Although Nick positions himself as the Feddens' middle child, it would be apt to read Nick as a replacement for Toby altogether as the far more capable son—with more ability to take care of his younger sister Catherine, his relative tolerance for the Conversative party (Toby accepts a job writing for *The Guardian* after graduation), and a better appreciation for the Feddens' collection of art, music, and furniture. Additionally, Nick moves into the house just as Toby moves into his own flat. The Feddens, of course, do not see Nick as this replacement child, but it is still significant that Nick posits himself as that. Envious of Toby's position, Nick engages in mimesis by trying to become Toby. Toby's absence from the Feddens' house is crucial for Nick's mission. Instead of being a love object, Toby is Nick's antagonist. Nick engages in a process of destroying Toby's presence in order to gain his place in London society.

Yet Nick certainly does not do what Melanie Klein suggests the subject must do to the idealized object: criticize, transform, spoil, and rob it of what it possesses. At least *The Line of Beauty* is not in the tradition of *Single White Female*. Nick still reveres Toby and wants to have sex with him. Sex itself, however, could still be read as performing these Kleinian actions. Leo Bersani discusses the self-shattering element of sex: "women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction" (Bersani 18). Bersani implies that the gay man who bottoms is necessarily suicidal. There is an element of sex and power in this framework, as Bersani picks up on "the moral taboo on 'passive' anal sex in ancient Athens [which] is primarily

formulated as a kind of hygienics of social power. *To be penetrated is to abdicate power*" (25). In other words, to penetrate a man is to take away his power:

> the self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power […] For it is perhaps primarily *the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship that condemns sexuality to become a struggle for power*. As soon as persons are posited, the war begins. It is the self that swells with the excitement at the idea of being on top, the self that makes of the inevitable play of thrusts and relinquishments in sex an argument for the natural authority of one sex over the other. (Bersani 25)

Bersani is primarily talking about heterosexuals, but the struggle for power is present among gay men engaging in penetrative anal sex.

Bersani ultimately argues that the distinction between tops and bottoms should not matter, that gay men should instead conceive of sex outside of a heterosexual framework. He advocates a reparative relationship to sex:

> gay men's 'obsession' with sex, far from being denied, should be celebrated […] because it never stops representing the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice. Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight of the self*, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis. (30)

Given the time and context in which Bersani published "Is the Rectum a Grave?"—in 1987, during the AIDS crisis—it is understandable, perhaps vital for the time, why his approach to discussing sex should be so reparative. His treatment of sex, specifically the dynamics of topping and bottoming, is not reflected in Hollinghurst's novels. Nick never bottoms throughout the novel. While *The Swimming-Pool Library* is more explicit about topping as a form of asserting

dominance over the bottom, *The Line of Beauty* is not entirely free of this framework either. Paul teases Nick about his sexual fantasy: "'Get Toby at two in the morning, when he's had a bottle of brandy, and you'll be able to do what you want with him'" (*LB* 58). This fantasy foregrounds Nick's pleasure; Toby is stripped entirely of his agency. Nick's desire for Toby therefore works in conjunction with his desire to become Toby. The idea of penetrating Toby takes on a destructive force—it would fulfill the objective of transforming Toby into something he is not. By penetrating Toby, Nick would therefore destroy him, leaving a vacancy in which he can take Toby's place in London society. Of course, this is all a fantasy. Nick never has sex with Toby, he is never accepted by the Feddens as a child, and he is ultimately rejected from the privileged world that he wants to become part of.

Gerald

If Nick were to replace Toby in the Fedden household, Gerald would be a father figure to him. This does not happen, both because Gerald rejects Nick as a son—he does not see Nick as anything beyond a guest at his house and a caretaker for Catherine—and because Nick does not treat Gerald as a surrogate father. Instead, their relationship takes on a note of rivalry. In keeping with his obsessiveness, Nick observes Gerald's backside twice in the novel. The first time occurs when Gerald returns from France. Nick helps him unload his luggage from the Range Rover: "He couldn't help noticing the almost annoying firmness of the MP's backside, pumped up no doubt by daily tennis and swimming in France. The suntanned legs were a further hint of sexual potential that Nick would normally have thought impossible in a man of forty-five" (*LB* 21). Gerald's backside comes to represent his wealth, its shape being the result of his leisure activities in France. He takes note of it again later: "Gerald's legs were still brown, and his confusingly

firm buttocks were set off by his tight Fred Perry shorts" (*LB* 106). Nick describing Gerald's buttocks as having an "almost annoying firmness" (*LB* 21) and being "confusingly firm" (*LB* 106) indicates that whatever attraction he does have is conflicted. Part of the barrier is age, but another part is the power that Gerald holds, both within the household and in the country.

Gerald poses an issue as the most privileged man in *The Line of Beauty*. He is white, older, wealthy, achieved, and heterosexual. Leo and Nick discuss Gerald in terms of his political status: "'He's quite nice-looking for a Tory,' Leo said. 'Yes, everyone seems to fancy him except me,' said Nick" (*LB* 93). Nick claims not to be attracted to him because they are rivals. In one passage, Nick and Gerald visit Barwick—Nick's hometown and Gerald's constituency—to attend a fair. They equally scope out the people in Barwick for different means: Gerald as constituents and potential votes in the next election, Nick to fulfill his own sexual proclivities: "He gazed around, following the Carter boy's amazing arse with his eyes, smiled loyally at Gerald's jokes, and sensed in them a mixture of piety and condescension rather like his own" (*LB* 236). Hollinghurst reinforces the similarities between Nick and Gerald: they have the same sense of humour and treat the people around them similarly. Perhaps Gerald is objectifying the women at the fair, just as Nick objectifies Gary Carter and his "amazing arse" (*LB* 236). Hollinghurst implies that, if Nick stayed in Barwick, he would take on the same role as Toby: "He thought he would just cruise out past Gary and stir his interest and fix a picture of him in his mind for later" (*LB* 251). Gary is another heterosexual man whom Nick objectifies, fetishizes, and fantasizes about penetrating: "And fuck, there was Gary Carter, setting out on the scent of his own Saturday night, in a short denim jacket and stiffly tight new jeans and that terrible sexy haircut; he called across to a mate under the market hall, he showed himself off to him somehow, with the funny unchallengeable poofiness of a handsome straight boy in a country town" (*LB*

251). Like Gerald's tight Fred Perry shorts, Gary's short denim jacket and tight jeans are meant to show off his assets. Nick questions why heterosexual men would do this: "girls apparently loved boys' bums too—good judgment, though Nick wasn't sure what they wanted with them" (*LB* 251). Women fetishize the male backside as well, although this does not have the same implication as a gay man doing this. Shortly after making this observation, Nick sees Gerald's assistant Penny's "hand, like an amorous teenager's, tucked in the back pocket of Gerald's trousers" (*LB* 252).

The novel does not highlight Gerald's sexual proclivities towards the women he does presumably have sex with—Penny and his wife Rachel. He does, however, exhibit attraction to Margaret Thatcher. He discusses Thatcher with the Tippers, Maurice and his daughter Sally:

> 'I love her!' exclaimed Sally Tipper, hoping perhaps they would take love to include friendship, as well as surpassing it.
>
> 'I know,' said Gerald. 'It's those blue eyes. Don't you just want to swim in them—what?'
>
> Sir Maurice didn't seem ready to go quite that far, and Rachel said, 'Not everyone's as infatuated as my husband,' lightly but meaningly. (*LB* 279)

Gerald's infatuation with Thatcher is played off as a joke, but it does appear to be based on genuine attraction. He fetishizes Thatcher's blue eyes, knowing that an actual sexual interaction with her is beyond possibility since the novel posits Thatcher as a sexualized object beyond the grasp of heterosexual men. Nick treats this attraction as a challenge. When Thatcher attends Gerald and Rachel's anniversary party, Nick asks her to dance with him:

> his heart running fast with no particular need of courage as he grinned and said, 'Prime Minister, would you like to dance?'

> ‘You know, I’d like that very much,’ said the PM, in her chest tones, the contralto of conviction. Around her the men sniggered and recoiled at an audacity that had been beyond them. Nick heard the whole episode already accruing its commentary, its history, as he went out with her among twitches of surprise, the sudden shifting of the centre of gravity, an effect that none of them could have caused and none could resist. He himself smiled down at an angle, ignoring them all, intimately held in what the PM was saying and the brilliant boldness of his replies. (*LB* 335-36)

Thatcher challenges the (presumably) straight men who watch from the sidelines of the dance-floor. What they can never imagine doing is “the simplest thing to do” (*LB* 335) for Nick. Nick’s homosexuality prevents him from seeing Thatcher as a potential sexual partner. Instead, he sees comedic value in dancing with her. Shortly after, “Gerald saw the PM, the idol, who had said before that she couldn’t dance, but who now, a couple of whiskies on, was getting down rather sexily with Nick” (*LB* 336). This is the most rivalrous Nick gets with Gerald, dancing sexily with the object of his attraction and flaunting it at Gerald’s own gathering. The section ends: “Gerald put a stop to that” (*LB* 336).

The next section moves away from the dance floor to Nick’s bathroom, where Nick, Wani, and Tristão gather:

> Wani chewing and sniffing, almost shivering, like someone who is ill. He had a look of wide-eyed gloom, racing and lost. He said he was fine, never better. He concentrated on unfolding the square of *Forum* magazine, and then scraping the girl’s dark pubic mound clear of powder. Nick sat on the edge of the bath, sat in the bath, crossways, with his legs hanging out, and watched Tristão taking a hugely protracted piss. (*LB* 336)

The novel abandons Thatcher in favour of sex, drugs, pornography, and urine. It is also implied that Wani is already suffering from AIDS. What follows is a peculiar sex scene among the three men:

> Tristão dropped his trousers and pants round his knees and sat on the edge of the little cane-seated chair. His dark heavy dick hung down. He put his hands up inside his shirt, pushed his shirt over his ribs, and twisted his nipples. 'You want to help me?' he said. Wani tutted and went to stand behind him, leaned over to watch as he pinched and coaxed the waiter's nipples between forefinger and thumb. Tristão sighed, smiled, and bit his parched lip. He looked down intently, as if it was always a marvel to him, as his cock stirred, and thickened, twitched its way languorously up across his thigh before floating free with a pink smile of its own as the skin slid back a little. (*LB* 338-39)

Nick puts on a condom presumably to penetrate either Wani or Tristão. Anal sex between gay men is subversive insofar as it is not heteronormative. Nevertheless, compared to other gay sex acts, it functions analogously to vaginal penetrative sex between a man and a woman. The stakes of deviancy are made clear when Hollinghurst reminds the viewer of Thatcher's proximity: "Downstairs the Prime Minister was leaving. Gerald had danced with her for almost ten minutes. He had the glow of intimacy and lightness of success about him as he saw her to her car, careless of the rain […] Rachel stood in the doorway, with Penny behind her" (*LB* 339-40). There is a parodic quality to connecting Thatcher not just to gay sex but also to an especially non-normative form of gay sex.

The aforementioned passage also reinforces a parallel between Nick and Gerald. Nick is upstairs with two of his lovers (Wani and Tristão) while Gerald is downstairs with two of his lovers (Rachel and Penny). They both danced with Thatcher that evening. In a sense, Nick and

Gerald need each other. They benefit from each other's presence. Christopher Chitty argues that "the Christian Temperance movement and the first flowering of the 'gay world,' as we now know it, more or less coexisted" (168). He describes how "the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] was a crucial nodal point both for networks of homosexual activity and for the spread of Christian values" (Chitty 168). In other words, not only did a conservative institution coexist with a queer subculture, but they both benefitted mutually. Chitty takes this argument further:

> One could similarly ask of the late twentieth century whether the apparently conservative fundamentalist Christian revival and the radical counterculture of free love weren't perhaps two faces of the same spiritual awakening, each intensifying the discursive status of sex by endowing it with profoundly transformative powers. (168)

Chitty writes from a strictly Americanist perspective. Christian fundamentalism does not play a role in *The Line of Beauty*, but one could compare its impact on queer life to Thatcherite conservatism. In the context of *The Line of Beauty*, a gay figure such as Nick benefits from conservatism insofar as it necessitates the development of strictly gay spaces such as bars, clubs, and cruising spaces. Nick's gay awakening does not occur until after he moves into the Feddens' house. Conversely, a Conservative MP like Gerald benefits from the existence of gay men like Nick as a straw man or foil against which to build the idea of being a respectable citizen and politician. Gerald attempts to embody respectability as a white, upper-class patriarch of a nuclear family. In a more literal sense, Nick benefits from Gerald since he gives him a place to live; Gerald benefits from Nick since he is able to take care of his daughter Catherine more effectively than any member of the family could.

Towards the end of the novel, their mutual benefit becomes mutual loss. Nick reads an article in the *Standard* and does not immediately grasp that the story concerns him: "The words and the pictures crowded out any sense of what they might mean. He felt oddly sorry for Bertrand: 'Peer's Playboy Son Has AIDS'. That was the subheading. 'Gay Sex Link to Minister's House.' Hard to get all that in. Didn't flow very well" (*LB* 409). The article details Nick's sexual exploits with men while living with the Feddens. It is Nick's connection to Gerald that is most significant; from Gerald's point of view, the link to the minister's house is more distressing than the exposure of Nick's homosexuality. He finds the connection difficult to grasp. He has always had sex in the fringes of the Feddens' properties: the communal garden, the attic room, and the pool house in their vacation home in France. Yet his actions have material consequences on Gerald. Gerald had already resigned from the House of Commons after his affair with Penny had been made public, but this new gay sex link does additional damage to his reputation. Toby reads out another headline to Nick:

> Toby pulled out the *Sun* and from the slew of newsprint on the table. '"Gay Sex Romp at MP's Holiday Home."' He threw it away from him, with a look of disdain and a hint of a challenge. 'It's really rather sweet their idea of what constitutes a romp,' Nick said, to try and put it in proportion.
>
> '*Sweet*…?' said Toby, incredulously, but with a flinch of regret as well, that he should be speaking like this to someone he'd always simply trusted. (*LB* 410)

Toby always knew that Nick was gay, so what is different now? It is not that sex had been happening at his family's houses—Toby knew about Nick's boyfriends except for Wani—but that his father had become implicated in Nick's gay sex acts. Nick's homosexuality is not a problem until it becomes public knowledge.

Both Nick and Gerald suffer. Their ultimate fates, however, are wildly different. The impact of the articles—loss of reputation and stature—are only temporary for Gerald. Nick points this out to Penny, when they are both at the Feddens' house collecting their things: "'It's rather amazing to resign in disgrace one day and be offered a job at eighty thousand a year the next'" (*LB* 434). Penny points out that is not amazing at all: "'That's how the world works, Nick. Gerald can't lose. You've got to understand that'" (*LB* 434-35). Both Nick and Gerald are implicated in scandals by the newspapers, but the status quo will be maintained for Gerald. Nick realizes this when Penny tells him that they are still together: "It seemed everything was going to go stubbornly on: first it was Rachel who wouldn't leave Gerald, and now Penny wouldn't either. He must have something extraordinary, Gerald, something Nick had been incapable of understanding" (*LB* 435). Gerald has both institutional power and sexual power: he is still high up in the Conservative party and neither of the women he has sex with want to leave him.

Nick's fate is drastically different. His former lover Leo dies of AIDS. His current lover Wani is dying from AIDS. He thinks about his demise as he is rejected by the Feddens and the privileged society that they used to offer him:

> The little car was jammed full of boxes and curled heaps of clothes on hangers. It sat low on its springs, under all these possessions heavy as passengers. Nick stood by it, still thinking, and then drifted unexpectedly down the street. The pavement was dry now in patches, but the sky was threatening and fast-moving. The tall white house-fronts had a muted gleam. It came over him that the test result would be positive. (*LB* 437)

Sex leads to his own possible demise from AIDS. He reflects on how the world will move ahead without him: "He tried to rationalize the fear, but its pull was too strong and original. It was inside himself, but the world around him, the parked cars, the cruising taxi, the church spire

among the trees, had also been changed. They had been revealed. It was like a drug sensation, but without the awareness of play" (*LB* 437). Nick's internal change is so immense he no longer sees the outside world the same. He sees how "everything was going to go stubbornly on" (*LB* 435) for Toby and Gerald but not for him. This turn towards the tragic reflects how Nick can never overcome his class in order to belong in the privileged world of the Feddens' London. This world, which he had attempted to navigate for three years, is ultimately indifferent towards him: "He seemed to fade pretty quickly" (*LB* 437).

Conclusion

> I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. (Thatcher qtd. in Brooker 78)

Among the revelations of this quotation, from a 1987 interview published in *Woman's Own*, are Thatcher's ruthless anti-welfare stance and her government's pro-family agenda that informs its treatment of homosexuality. She also places emphasis on individualism and initiative rather than society and intervention. This position is, ironically, reflected in Hollinghurst's writing practice:

> In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the general election of 1983 had gone unremarked by the self-absorbed young narrator, but the new book [*The Line of Beauty*] was to be framed by the elections of 1983 and 1987, and to have an ambitious Tory MP as a leading character. It would not, however, be a panoramic public novel, but an intimate and peculiar personal history, of the kind I have always liked to write. ("OW")

Hollinghurst does not write about society, he claims, but about individuals. The sex and politics metaphors in his work do not take on the shape of a marginalized protagonist whose sexual journey serves as a direct rebellion against the oppressive forces of Thatcherism. Sex in Hollinghurst's novels is not as straightforward as that. Instead, these individuals are all alienated from the political circumstances in which they find themselves; with the exception of Will following his discovery, they do not engage directly with the forces of oppression at work. This

does not mean that the sexual experiences they have are entirely disconnected from their political circumstances; rather, politics affect their sexual experiences despite the characters' being unpolitical.

The novels themselves are also particularly individual: *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Folding Star*, and *The Line of Beauty* all treat sex differently. The representations of sex in these novels are still interrelated with politics, but their orientations with regards to political circumstances are disparate. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Will is too self-absorbed and privileged to engage with British politics, instead choosing to focus almost exclusively on his hedonistic sexual career. Moreover, he does not treat Thatcherite attitudes towards homosexuality with the kind of urgency that the AIDS crisis would necessitate. In *The Folding Star*, Edward is alienated from Britain altogether. The country's absence becomes the focal point of the novel's engagement with Thatcherism. Hollinghurst omitting Britain calls attention to the decades of political conservatism that have led to Britain becoming uninhabitable to gay men. Hollinghurst ties Britain's uninhabitability to the AIDS crisis, since Edward left after being traumatized by the death of his former lover Dawn by AIDS. Meanwhile, in *The Line of Beauty*, Nick remains unpolitical, but he navigates the political climate under Thatcher, even to the extent of dancing with the prime minister herself. Nick attempts to gain power are not through sexual means but through social means by aligning himself with the powerful Feddens in London society. He does use sex, specifically his sexual relationship with their family-friend Wani, to justify his continued presence in their social sphere. The novel turns to the tragic when it ends with the suggestion that Nick contracts AIDS and will die soon. The AIDS crisis, its presence more immediate in *The Line of Beauty* than the other novels, complicates the representation of sex as a political act since sex becomes dangerous and tragic.

If the novels' treatments of sex and politics are disparate, it follows that this thesis is also disparate in structure. Instead of building an argument over the course of Hollinghurst's oeuvre, it reads more like an anthology detailing the different ways in which Hollinghurst engages with sex and politics. Regardless, this thesis reaffirms the significance of sex in Hollinghurst's novels. In doing so, I avoid reducing Hollinghurst to being a gay writer insofar as his novels are about lots of things other than gay sex such as "history, class, culture" (Hollinghurst qtd. in Stevens "Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Fiction" 627). But gay sex can still be a crucial aspect in his novels that Hollinghurst uses to explore these topics. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, when Gabriel suggests he could whip Will in retaliation for what the United Kingdom did to Argentina in the Falklands War, Will archly responds: "'I think that might be to take the sex and politics metaphor a bit too seriously, old chap'" (*SPL* 396). There is a cheekiness in having Will bring up the sex and politics metaphor so bluntly. It is a self-reflexive moment to reaffirm that the sex and politics metaphor is always present in Hollinghurst's works—even if it is not always obvious.

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